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The Writing Practices and Writer Identities of Adult Learners Participating in a Community-Based Adult Education Program

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The Writing Practices and Writer Identities of Adult Learners Participating in a Community-Based Adult Education Program

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Dedication

To home

Past and present

"What the bubble always points to,

whether we notice it or not, is home."

Miller Williams, *The Shrinking Lonesome Sestina*

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The Writing Practices and Writer Identities of Adult Learners Participating in a Community-Based Adult Education Program

Kerry Hollis Ballast, Ph.D.

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In light of current concerns around the writing skills of adults in postsecondary and workforce settings, this study examined the writing practices and writer identities of adult learners participating in a community-based adult education program. Because writing is often treated as a literacy skill secondary to reading (Brandt, 2001), little research is available to speak to how adult learners develop practices as writers. Even less speaks to the writer identities adults bring to acts of writing and how or if those identities are changed as a result of writing. Given the complex nature of writing and complicating factors often present in adult education settings, it is important to better understand adult learners as writers and to identify ways educators can best support them.

This case study followed three adult learners as they worked with instructors to improve writing skills—two in preparation for the 2014 General Educational Development (GED®) exam, the third for better proficiency with English. Data gathered through observations, interviews, writing samples, and writing curriculum indicated that

while the instructors viewed writing and writing instruction as relatively easy processes, the adult learners struggled to make sense of writing and were uncertain of how to express their frustrations and concerns. Data also indicated that both the instructors and adult learners devoted a great amount of time and talk to referencing rules, formulas, and guidelines throughout each writing activity. The frequent references undermined the instructors' explanations of writing as an uncomplicated activity and created moments of tension in which the adult learners and instructors wrestled with the complexities of writing. These moments became examples of breakdowns in the banking concept (Freire, 2000) and of disconnects in which adult learners questioned their abilities and identities as writers.

Study results showed writing to be a complex social act in which adult learners and instructors managed relationships, shared histories, navigated rules, and negotiated authority. For institutions that hope to see more and better adult writers, first steps lie in supporting educators who understand the complex nature of writing and who invite classroom conversations, acknowledge others' experiences, and share their own histories with writing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a former secondary English teacher, a teacher consultant for the National Writing Project, and a current employee of a state education agency, I have long been interested in writing instruction for both adolescents and adults. During my 14 years in secondary classrooms, I worked with eager, ambivalent, and reluctant adolescent writers, and I thought deeply about the writing instruction in my classroom. During my twelve years as a teacher consultant, I have worked alongside other teachers eager to improve upon their own practices as writers and as writing instructors. During my nine years as a state education employee, I have worked with policymakers who emphasize the importance of writing and often question what K–12 schools can do to produce better writers. It is also during my time at the state education agency that I have become keenly aware of concerns raised by postsecondary and business leaders, many stating that students who exit the K–12 system (whether through on-time graduation, expulsion, or drop out) are not able to meet the writing demands of a college classroom or an entry-level job. The concerns then shift to questions of how to close the perceived gaps between the K–12 system and the world beyond and how to improve the literacy skills of adults entering postsecondary education or the workforce.

As a result of legislation passed in 2009 (House Bill 4328, 81st Texas Legislature), I served on an interagency literacy council in which three state agencies—the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission—came together to discuss state and private efforts in adult education, to hear testimony from state and private adult education providers, and to

hear personal stories from adults who were successfully participating in adult education programs. I recall being struck by the many interpretations of adult education and the multiple approaches organizations took. I also recall being deeply touched by the stories shared by the adult learners. Their reasons for entering adult education programs frequently began with accounts of how they were unable to graduate from high school and often ended with future plans to earn General Educational Development (GED®) certificates. Their GED® certificates would be earned by completing a series of tests across four academic areas—English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies—and their abilities to pass the tests hinged largely on work they were doing in adult education programs. The GED®, which is described in terms of "generations" on its website, began in 1942 when high school diplomas were the primary requirement for many industrial-era jobs. Since then, the GED® has gone through four major transformations, each time attempting to better reflect changing job markets, secondary curricula, and public attitudes about education ("History of the GED®", n.d.). At the time of the council meetings (which spanned from 2009 to 2011), GED® tests were in the final years of the 2002 series, which officially ended at the end of 2013. In January 2014, the GED® program transitioned to an entirely computer-administered system that tests adults in (1) Reasoning Through Language Arts, (2) Mathematics Reasoning, (3) Science, and (4) Social Studies ("A fighting chance," n.d.).

The work of the Interagency Literacy Council ended in 2011, but conversations about the newest generation of the GED® and its impact on adult education programs in Texas continues across various state agencies, including the Texas Education Agency, the

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission. The new GED® has also prompted a great deal of discussion among members of Texas' State Board of Education (SBOE). As early as 2012, members of the SBOE questioned the move to computer-administration only, the rising costs of testing, and the motives of a for-profit company (Pearson) managing the GED® and began exploring options for creating a state-based alternative (Smith, 2012; Ursch, 2013). Throughout 2015 and 2016, the SBOE continued to discuss alternatives to the GED® (Taboado, 2015), and because I am an employee of the state agency that works directly with the SBOE, I once again find myself listening to conversations about the GED® testing program and the adult learners it affects.

The 2014 version of the GED® is described as a more complex test when compared to earlier versions ("History of the GED®," n.d.) and as a response to an increase in jobs and a decrease in qualified workers who must be able to read and write a variety of texts in postsecondary education and in the workforce ("A fighting chance," n.d.). The Reasoning Through Language Arts (RLA) Test in particular includes a writing component that "integrates reading and writing into meaningful tasks that require candidates to support their written analysis with evidence drawn from a given source text(s) of appropriate complexity provided in the test" ("Reasoning through language arts," n.d.). The new writing component is further described as follows:

> Because the strongest predictor of career and college readiness is the ability to read and comprehend complex texts, especially nonfiction, the RLA Test includes texts from both academic and workplace contexts. These texts reflect a range of

> complexity levels, in terms of ideas, syntax and style. The writing tasks, or Extended Response (ER) items, require test-takers to analyze given source texts and use evidence drawn from the text(s) to support their answers ("Reasoning through language arts," n.d.).

These new requirements—analysis and synthesis of various texts while working at a computer—raise numerous questions about how adult education programs go about preparing adults for the writing component and how the adult learners perceive these new writing requirements.

As someone who has worked through writing tasks with both adolescents and adults, writing and writing instruction can be complicated and time-consuming, even when working under ideal circumstances. The secondary English teacher in me remembers the reluctance many adolescents bring to a writing task and the delicate balance a teacher must strike as she encourages and supports budding writers while at the same time teaching to state standards and preparing for high-stakes assessments. As an NWP teacher consultant, I continue to work with teachers who have discovered successful approaches to writing instruction and who, in spite of their successes, continue to question and perfect their own skills as writers and teachers. As a writer, I have experienced first-hand the incredible work that goes into writing a note to a friend, a paper for a class, or a report for a committee and the personal measurements of competence when I stare at a blank screen, read one of my many clumsily worded sentences, or receive negative feedback from a colleague or instructor. These experiences tell me that writing is a complex and often demanding undertaking that encompasses not

only the knowledge and skills of writing but also attitudes and identities tied to writing. This recounting of my own experiences is not to say that my work with adolescent students and with other teachers automatically transfers to an understanding of adult learners and their instructors; it is to say, however, that my experiences have created a baseline understanding of what writing instruction might look like in an adult education program and what practices and identities adult learners might bring to writing tasks. It is this understanding that compels me to look deeply at the writing instruction and writing practices occurring in adult education programs.

The experiences and conversations shared thus far are limited to what I have been part of only in Texas and only in recent years. I bring one incredibly small perspective to a much larger and older conversation. Adult education policy reflects a rich and long history of national-level conversations, debates, publications, and programs aimed at emphasizing the importance of writing and the need for improvement of writing skills in adults headed to postsecondary education and the workforce. This emphasis in improved writing took root in the 1940s as service men and women returned home from World War II and continues into the 21st century as schools and industries work to recruit, educate, and support adults who ultimately find themselves competing for jobs in a global marketplace. A review of current literature indicates that concerns raised over 60 years ago have not been resolved. Policy papers—both at the national and state levels—continue to issue calls for improvement in writing skills (National Commission on Writing, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2004; Southern Regional Education Board, 2013), but little is said about how to accomplish such a large task. The few

examples of scholarly research on writing instruction in adult literacy programs suggest that this topic has become a secondary consideration as the adult education community wrestles with more prominent topics such as the acquisition and improvement of language and reading skills, the inevitable questions of how to measure literacy gains, and the effectiveness of adult literacy programs and the educators who work within them. With this lack of research in writing noted, it is important to identify what has been done in response to the calls for improved writing skills in adults and to discuss what we know through research conducted thus far.

Adult Literacy Programs

A review of literature on writing and writing instruction in adult literacy programs leads to numerous interpretations of how programs assist adults in the acquisition, practice, and improvement of basic literacy skills—speaking, reading, and writing—with reading typically receiving the greatest attention. The examples of programs range from community- and college-sponsored GED® preparation programs, to community-based family literacy programs, to work-based employee training programs. Examples of how writing and writing instruction are implemented within these programs vary greatly. The instructional focus largely depends on each program's purpose, each learner's motivations and goals, and each instructor's approach to literacy instruction. In some settings, writing is a primary focus, such as when adults are preparing for GED® exams, and in other settings, it is treated as a secondary activity.

To date, the adult literacy research community knows a great deal about the calls for improved literacy skills in adults entering postsecondary education and the workforce

(and the urgency in which those calls are often expressed), the programs established as a result of national-, state-, and community-sponsored initiatives, and the various approaches programs take in working with adults. Researchers are beginning to learn more about the educators who work within these programs and the instructional decisions they make when working with adult learners. Researchers are also beginning to learn more about the adults who enroll in these programs, particularly their motivations for entering and leaving programs and their social identities, beliefs, and transformations as they acknowledge personal struggles and the need to improve literacy skills. This learner-focused research is allowing better understandings of the adults who enter literacy programs, but more needs to be learned about the personal gains and setbacks experienced by adult learners and the impact of literacy instruction on identity, especially as adults work to regain lost educational ground and, in some cases, return to schooling environments in which they had earlier struggled. A great deal more also needs to be learned about the identities adult learners bring to acts of writing—their identities as writers—and how those identities develop and change while working within adult education programs.

Writer Identity

This identity as writer is rarely acknowledged when adults reflect on their literacy development (Brandt, 2001), but it is something that researchers should explore (Gillespie, 2001). While there is very little known about writer identity, it is possible to begin by first considering learner identity in general and then, through observations and questions, begin to focus on writer identity in particular. When considering learner

identity in general, it is important to note that many adult learners struggle with negative self-images (Bridwell, 2013; Crowther, Maclachlan, & Tett, 2010; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Howard & Logan, 2012) and that many come to literacy programs "bound by their histories and access to different discourses" (Fernsten, 2008, p. 45). It is also important to note that many adult learners come to programs with images of their "possible selves" (Rossiter, 2009). That is, they come to programs with images of selves they hope to become, expect to become, or wish to avoid becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). There is ample research pointing to examples of teachers, preservice teachers, postsecondary students, and K–12 students who struggle with writing and who recall negative attitudes and experiences with writing (Brandt, 2001; Cremin & Oliver, 2016; Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011; McCarthy & Garcia, 2005; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Tunks, 2010). It is not unreasonable to think that adult learners bring similar attitudes and experiences to adult education programs. If adult learners come to the classroom with beliefs that they cannot write, or if they have had previous negative experiences with writing, it is possible that they will not make the progress adult literacy educators hope for. Similarly, if adult learners come to the classroom with an enthusiasm for writing, or with positive experiences with writing, educators must be mindful of the strengths adult learners bring to the table and facilitate activities that build upon those strengths. Educators must remain open to the idea that adult learners bring writer identities to the classroom and that the activities and conversations of the classroom can sustain, tear down, redefine, or build upon those identities. Educators must also move beyond the louder, larger conversations of more and better writing and consider the individual adults—their practices, their

beliefs, their experiences—as they write in a variety of contexts ranging from high-stakes test preparation to informal journaling. The adult learners' experiences with writing can become a significant factor in their success or failure within a program and in their future experiences with writing.

As stated earlier, writing and writing instruction is a complex undertaking, even when attempted in the most favorable conditions. If we add in the complicating factors often present in adult education programs (e.g., interrupted or incomplete schooling, time constraints, high-stakes testing), the persistent calls for better writing in postsecondary classrooms and the workplace, and new GED® writing requirements, questions about writing instruction and the writing practices and identities of adult learners become much more timely and important.

Research Questions

This study focuses on adult learners as they write within a community-based adult education program and explores writer identity and how it influences and is influenced by acts of writing. The study will explore the following questions:

1. What is the nature of writing in an adult education program?
2. How do the adult learners develop practices as writers while working within an adult education program?
3. How are the adult learners' identities as writers shaped as they complete writing activities within an adult education program?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted within a sociocultural theory of literacy development that views literacy as a cultural practice that is situated within sociocultural contexts. This study was also conducted through a critical lens to determine if and how social and political domination are reproduced in text and talk within an adult education program, specifically, the program's language arts classroom. The accompanying literature review presents the purposes and ideologies behind the various approaches to adult literacy education and makes note of the ideological differences regarding how to best serve adult learners. It is important to point out that a great deal of the qualitative research on adult literacy education focuses on participants who have been marginalized by race, class, or gender and on participants who were pushed out of or were unsuccessful in traditional school settings. While it is not accurate to say that all adults who enter literacy programs have been marginalized in some way, it is fair to suggest that many who enter programs have experienced obstacles (e.g., social location, language/literacy proficiency, interrupted schooling) in their education and wish to regain lost ground. For this reason, it was important to explore the obstacle(s) adult learners may have experienced in previous schooling or employment and to critically consider if those obstacles had been reproduced within this study's language arts classroom. It was also important to understand how literacy was defined and taught within the classroom and to consider if the adult learners were participating in traditional approaches to literacy instruction or were engaging in socially situated literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street,

1989). This understanding was accomplished by examining the language of the classroom—spoken and written—through a critical lens as described by Fairclough in *Language and Power* (1989).

Fairclough, a founder of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), asserts that language is a form of social practice and that social and political domination are reproduced in text and talk (Fairclough, 2013). CDA allowed a detailed study of curriculum documents, classroom talk, and the adult learners' writing and enabled me to consider how the language of the classroom reconstructed representations of the world, social identities, and social relationships (Luke, 1997). Because there is no one approach to CDA, various methods of discourse analysis were used. My analysis uncovered insights into the ways language reproduced or resisted social and political inequality and how it reproduced or resisted dominance by specific social groups (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). CDA allowed an examination of the content and structure of language through a politically motivated lens.

When examining the discourses of the classroom, I found rich personal experience narratives embedded in the spoken conversations among the instructors and adult learners and in the written texts produced by the adult learners. There were numerous reasons for a speaker or writer to share personal experience narratives, but they used the narratives primarily to shape identity, to develop an understanding of self, or to become the narratives they told about themselves (Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Schiffrin, 1993). Close examinations of the narratives provided rich insights into (1) their schooling experiences, which created an understanding of how they saw themselves as

past and present learners, and (2) their writing experiences, which created an understanding of how they saw themselves as past and present writers. Narrative analysis also provided insights into the shifts and/or changes in learner and/or writer identities resulting from their writing experiences within the language arts classroom.

There is a history of narrative analysis within CDA (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), specifically when looking at the narratives people use to construct national identity, to create online identities (Lemke, 2002), and to explore political views (Wodak & Krzyanowski, 2008). For this study, narrative analysis provided a second layer of examination when looking at the spoken and written language of the classroom. It also provided a lens through which to isolate personal stories from the larger conversations and to consider how those stories were used to manage selves and identities (Schiffrin, 1996).

I relied greatly on narratives to identify themes, to examine the grammar and structure of a speaker's language as he or she told or wrote about a personal experience, and to examine the interactions between the speaker and his listener(s) (Riessman, 2003). Narrative analysis, when used within CDA, provided a lens to consider the adult learners' narratives as they bumped up against institutional discourses. It was through these narratives that "individuals concretely start(ed) questioning their own realities and identifying the socio-ideological influence of systemic and institutional discourses on their beliefs and practices, on their heteroglot conceptions of their worlds (Bakhtin, 1981)" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 161).

Consider the adult education classroom in this study as the point at which failed

schooling, delayed schooling, and deferred schooling converged with the institutional discourses of adult education commissions, legislative mandates, federally- and state-funded literacy programs, and a for-profit testing service. This convergence provided a rich backdrop to talk to and observe instructors as they worked with adult learners and adult learners as they navigated the various program and testing requirements. I watched, listened to, and read the language of the classroom through a critical lens, and I wondered if the adult learners were thinking about their learning experiences through a similar lens. Their narratives—shared through talk and text—gave me an answer.

Related Literature

There are numerous publications emphasizing the need for improved writing skills in adults, particularly those entering postsecondary education or the workforce. There is, however, very little literature on writing activities, writing instruction, and how adults develop as writers. The few examples are typically the results of larger studies focusing on the social contexts of adult literacy education or reports of specific writing activities introduced in postsecondary or adult literacy classrooms. In short, the education community (policymakers, advocates, educators) seems to know a great deal about the need for improved writing skills in adults, but very little about how they might go about solving the problem. The literature review that follows is organized according to the knowledge base of writing and writing instruction in adult literacy programs. It begins with the largest conversation—the need for improved writing skills—and ends with a small but enlightening exploration of writer identity. The examples of literature that fall

in between tell us more about the various programs and the adults who play an integral role in adult literacy education—the educators and the adult learners.

Calls for better writing.

A review of policy papers published by federal and state governments, commissions, and business associations indicates a growing and at times emphatic conversation around the need for improved writing skills in U.S. classrooms and businesses. Many of the publications call for improvements in writing instruction in K–12 settings, acknowledging that, even after graduation from high school, many students are not prepared to successfully complete academic writing tasks assigned within college or university classrooms or job-related writing tasks assigned by supervisors (National Commission on Writing, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2004; Southern Regional Education Board, 2013). Others call for programs to improve the writing skills of adults who have exited the K–12 setting—either through a normal graduation path or by dropping out before completion—and lack the writing skills needed to be successful in postsecondary settings or in the workforce (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). Still others call for programs to assist English language learners who are members of the U.S. workforce but lack proficiency in the English language, and thereby lack English-based reading and writing skills necessary for long-term employment or upward mobility (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). These publications raise public awareness (and sometimes anxiety) and chart courses for large-scale educational reform. When questions of how to bring about widespread change arise, the attention shifts to programs and people.

Definitions and purposes of adult education programs.

There is no neat definition of an adult education program. Descriptions of various programs past and present show that adult education programs vary in what services are provided and who is served. Approaches to literacy instruction within these programs also vary. The approaches often represent theoretical differences in how literacy is defined, what kinds of literacy practices are valued (Street, 1984), and which literacy practices are excluded (Cherryholmes, 1988). The philosophical differences in approaches are often present in national-, state-, and community-level discussions among policymakers, scholars, education activists, and practitioners.

The educators and adult learners associated with adult education programs are most likely unaware of the ongoing theoretical and philosophical debates occurring on the political front. They, instead, tend to focus on the day-to-day, on-the-ground components that shape a program: guidelines, schedules, finances, locations, attendance, and materials. The educators typically make decisions regarding curriculum materials and how they will be used, which activities work best, who directs those activities, and whose goals will be met in the classroom. It is also typically the educators who determine how or if the adult learners are part of those decisions. The adult learners, in most cases, make personal decisions to return to a classroom, and those decisions are often the result of commitments made to themselves, their families, and/or their employers. As a result, adult education programs look quite different according to the educators and adult learners who participate in them. They also provide a large number of services to a large

and diverse population of adults. Table 1 provides names and descriptions of various adult education programs.

Table 1: Examples of adult literacy education programs

Type of Program	Typically provides	Typically serves
Adult Basic Education	Classes for adults who need basic skills instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, life skills, and job readiness	Adults age 16 or over with academic skills below the high school completion level or in need of increased English language skills
Correctional Education	Adult education and literacy services at correctional or detention facilities	Adults held in community justice centers, jails, prisons, or detention centers
Special Education Services for Adults	Instruction that assists adults who struggle with learning (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia) to learn strategies to perform more effectively at work and in everyday life	Adults with learning disabilities who struggled in K–12 education and who continue to struggle in postsecondary and workplace settings
Adult Secondary Education or GED® Preparation and Testing	Instruction that prepares learners to take and pass the GED® exams	Adults age 16 or over who are no longer eligible for

Table 1: continued.

		traditional secondary education programs
English as a Second Language (ESL)	Instruction that addresses both spoken and written communication skills	Limited English speaking adults
Family Literacy	Instruction that encompasses adult education, parenting skills, and early childhood education	Adults who wish to better understand their children's development and to become active participants in their children's education
Workplace Education	Instruction that teaches job-specific skills	Adults in entry-level positions

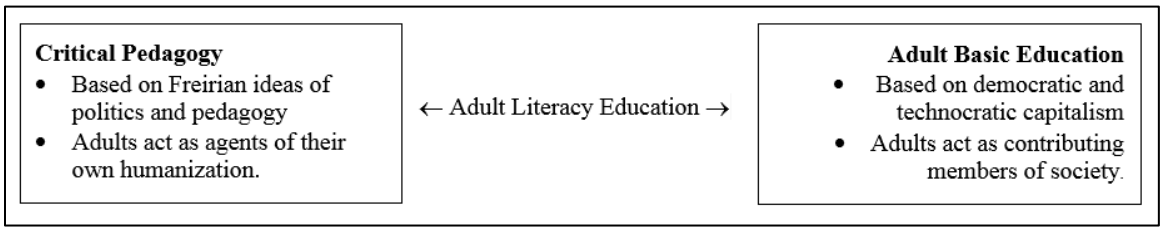
Approaches to adult literacy education.

Before focusing on adult literacy education at the classroom level, it will be helpful to name the two approaches often at the center of the ongoing and sometimes contentious political conversations. Approaches to adult literacy education often represent long-standing beliefs of what literacy can accomplish. One approach, most often referred to Adult Basic Education (ABE), is rooted in federal-level goals of improving the reading and writing skills of undereducated or less proficient adults so they may become more productive, successful members of society and the U.S. workforce. From the ABE viewpoint, literacy skills are essential in meeting workforce demands in a

postindustrial economy and in supporting federal government efforts at welfare reform (Demetrion, 2005). A second approach, critical pedagogy, views literacy as a means to engage its participants in "problem-solving education" so that students "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" (Freire, 2011, p. 29). As Freire (2000) proposed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, literacy gives voice to participants so they can (1) name the sources of their domination and (2) collectively organize to bring about socioeconomic and political change. From the critical pedagogy viewpoint, literacy skills are "often viewed as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world" (Scribner, 1988, p. 75).

The two approaches represent two very different views of literacy; one approach (ABE) sustains a dominant world-view of literacy as a neutral act, enabling a learner to improve himself and become a more productive member of society, while the other (critical pedagogy) views literacy as a tool of empowerment, enabling a learner to "read the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 2013). As Demetrion (2005) explains, the two approaches sit at opposite ends of an adult literacy education continuum, reflecting sharply different ideologies and creating tensions between political proponents of each approach. The origins of these tensions are discussed more fully in the next section.

Figure 1: Adult literacy education continuum



Tensions between the two approaches.

The tensions within adult literacy education can be traced back to the end of World War II, a time in which the U.S. experienced a wave of industrial growth as service men and women returned from an overseas war and began to settle back into a nation that had restructured its industries for wartime and now peacetime production. In response to military personnel returning to the domestic economy, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944), better known as the G.I. Bill. For at least a temporary period, the G.I. program allowed an unprecedented number of veterans to attend colleges, universities, and other types of postsecondary institutions (Thelin, Edwards, & Moyen, n.d.). It also marked the beginning of an era of unprecedented growth and expansion for post-secondary education in general. Adults who had typically not gone to college were going, and with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, access to postsecondary education became easier for a larger pool of adults (not just service men and women). The act lowered financial and academic barriers, and some institutions promoted open-door policies for anyone seeking a postsecondary education (Reder, 2000). As community colleges and four-year schools took in a new wave of students, it became evident that a large number of adults did not have the basic skills

necessary for postsecondary success, and developmental or remedial programs began to spring up in vocational schools, community colleges, and four-year schools (Reder). In parallel with postsecondary institutions, industry leaders also discovered that much of its new workforce lacked basic literacy skills. As a result, funding and programs were established to provide adults with the literacy skills needed to work in American industry. These programs, referenced earlier as ABE, were intended to assist undereducated adults who lacked basic skills in reading and writing so that they could *function* in the workplace and in the larger society (Demetrion, 2005). Basic skills —reading and writing—are also often referred to as *functional literacy,* a term popularized in the 1960s to refer to skills linked particularly to employment (Cook, 1977).

The ABE movement gained a great deal of momentum in the 1960s as post-secondary institutions and industry responded to a perceived lack of basic skills in many of their students and workers, but by the 1970s, teachers, their adult students, and education activists began to question the relevance and purpose of ABE programs. Opponents of ABE charged that the programs reproduced the values of the dominant culture (Degener, 2001; Demetrion, 2005) by applying traditional definitions and instructional methods to the teaching of basic literacy skills, a problematic approach when it is considered that the "meanings of literacy differ from group to group within a society" (Scribner, 1988, p. 10) and that the programs tended to rely on traditional K–12 methods of instruction that, for some adults, were not meaningful or successful in earlier schooling years (Weiner, 2005). Many adults entering the ABE programs were already contributing members of their communities and were once again required to passively sit

in classrooms and learn skills in a way that perpetuated their marginalized positions in society (Weiner, 2005). The ABE programs that began in the 1940s—and continue in varying forms in present day—represented a particular world view of literacy (Demetrion, 2005), and along with a particular world view came the privileging of the literacy practices of the dominant culture and the marginalization of the literacy practices of others (Besnier & Street, 1994; Gee, 1990; Street, 2006). The criticisms expressed by opponents of ABE created tensions within the adult education world, and by the 70s, an ideologically opposite approach emerged—critical pedagogy.

The publication of Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) proposed a new approach to adult literacy education in which literacy was linked to political engagement of the oppressed rather than maintenance of the political status quo (Demetrion, 2005). Freire, who had experienced poverty as a child and who understood the struggles of being educated within a system that reproduced the dominant culture, proposed a critical pedagogy in which teachers and their students see education as a political act (Freire, 2000). According to Freire, teachers and students must be made aware of the politics that surround education, and they must understand that the ways students are taught and what they are taught serves a political agenda. Freire likened education to a banking model in which knowledge was deposited into the student, who in turn received the knowledge without questioning. The model, Freire believed, quickly extinguished any creativity within students and reproduced the power and thinking of the dominant culture. With Freire's ideologies in mind, many adult education programs and educators began to embrace an approach in which students took an active role in their

education, often working with the teacher to determine what was relevant in their lives and what needed to be learned. The critical pedagogy approach, as it was practiced then and into present day, centers on the assumption that within a democratic setting, students are able to critically analyze their positions within society and must learn how to challenge the status quo (Degener, 2001).

Demetrion (2005) describes a continuum of adult literacy education with critical pedagogy on one end and ABE at the other. Street (2006) provides another lens through which to think about the continuum. He proposes two literacy models: autonomous and ideological (Street, 1984). The autonomous model, present in many schooling and developmental programs, assumes that literacy in itself has effects on other social and cognitive practices. Street (2006) explains,

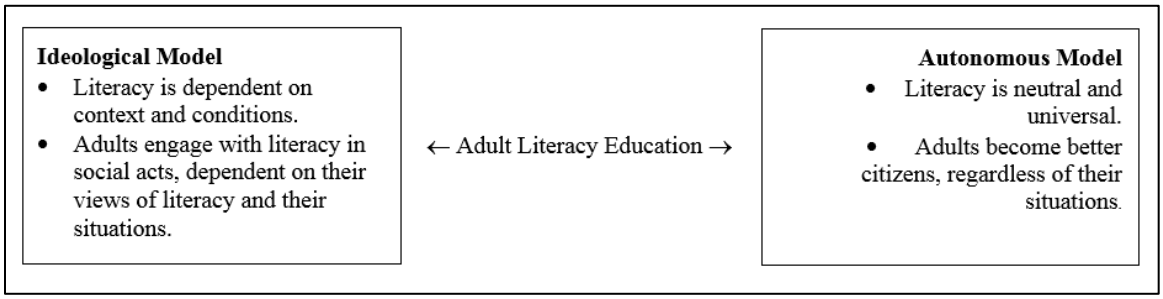
> Introducing literacy to poor, "illiterate" people, villages, urban youth, etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their "illiteracy" in the first place (p. 1).

The ideological model offers a more culturally sensitive view by seeing literacy as something that is always embedded in social practices. The effects of learning a particular literacy are dependent on a particular social context (Street). He adds,

> Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always "ideological," they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Besnier & Street, 1994; Gee, 1990) (p. 2).

If we were to apply the same thinking to the adult literacy continuum used earlier to describe critical pedagogy and ABE, a second continuum might look like this:

Figure 2: Literacy models continuum



This second continuum does not imply distinct connections between critical pedagogy, ABE, and the ideological and autonomous models. (There are, however, noteworthy similarities.) Rather, it serves as a visual reminder that world-views of literacy appear to be at opposite ends of a spectrum. As Demetrion (2005) explains, literacy is used as a means to sustain or disrupt power. Street (1984) proposes that literacy is treated as a set of neutral, autonomous skills or as a set of socially practiced skills. Both explanations underscore the opposing views of literacy often present in national- and state-level conversations about adult literacy education, views that inevitably align with political ideologies, views that inevitably become the basis for decisions on funding and support for national, state, and community programs. The purposes and goals of adult literacy education programs are often defined and discussed on political fronts that talk in dichotomies—effective and ineffective approaches in a black and white world. The discussions and decisions, however, ultimately land in a very gray world of educators and adult literacy learners. If we were to think about a continuum

one final time, rather than considering the opposite extremes, it is time to think about the middle.

Conversations from a middle ground.

With the differences and critiques of the two extremes noted, it is important to point out that over the past few decades scholars have called for a middle ground in which literacy is taught within a sociocultural context, with the context determining which skills and practices are privileged (Demetrion, 2005; Street, 2006). With this middle-ground approach, literacy events are practiced and valued within a social context and are not measured according to a "one-dimensional scale that holds sway in public policy" (Merrifield, 1998, p. 30), an important point to remember in light of ongoing discussions about measurements of effective programs. One way to theorize this middle ground is through theories of literacy instruction as described by New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street 1984, 1995). NLS is rooted within ethnographic studies such as those conducted by Heath (1983), Purcell-Gates (1995), and Purcell-Gates & Waterman (2000). Their studies provide valuable insights into the adult learners' beliefs about correct forms of language use, especially as language is used within school settings. Each study also provided rich and detailed descriptions of the literacy practices the subjects engaged in each day within home and community settings, practices that often went unrecognized and undervalued.

In seeking to strike a balance between the two approaches—ABE and critical pedagogy—it has been argued that effective literacy programs are those that respond to needs, regardless of whether those needs are basic skills, social power, or self-

improvement (Scribner, 1988). As a result, the approach (or the combination of approaches) becomes secondary to the adult learners' needs. Freire, for example, saw literacy education as a balance of traditional skills and a critical awareness of how those skills can be used to sustain or challenge the dominant culture. In a later publication, he writes that those who have developed a critical consciousness and need to change their own reality (liberation) need to "break the code" (Freire & Macedo, 2013). Purcell-Gates and Waterman's (2000) work with eight El Salvadoran women also serves as a prime example of *balanced literacy instruction* in which holistic activities were blended with focused skill instruction. Finally, Rogers and Kramer's (2008) study of adult education teachers explored how each teacher addressed critical literacy pedagogy as they worked with adult learners in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), community, and family literacy programs. The adults within each of the programs learned and practiced basic literacy skills, but they also learned to assess the relationships between domination and power that underlie texts. One example of an adult literacy educator who found a balanced approach was Dorothy, an African-American retired public school teacher who returned to her former school district to teach adult literacy classes. Dorothy worked with her students to improve basic reading and writing skills using both traditional and community texts. She made a point to know each student personally so that she understood the students' stages of change (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997) and the reasons why the adult learners came to the classroom. According to Rogers and Kramer, she also explicitly taught students "codes of power" (Delpit, 2006) so that they could uncover the invisible discourses of texts.

Policymakers and a wide array of advocates for adult literacy education continue to grapple with which approach is most beneficial for adult learners and which serves a greater good—economically, ethically, and socially. As discussions and debates continue, it sometimes seems that adult literacy education is destined to remain a point of contention and a pressing national concern as political parties warn of increasing global competition on the economic front. The discussions, however, ultimately filter down to the practitioner level, a level at which educators and researchers personally experience the realities of working with adult learners, explore various approaches to adult literacy education, and observe educators and adult learners as they work in a variety of contexts. Thus far, this review has focused on the various approaches, the resulting tensions, and the necessity for a common ground. From here, it will be helpful to consider what we are learning about adult literacy education. Studies of adult literacy programs and the educators and adult learners who work within them follow.

Research on adult literacy programs.

It is interesting to note that adult literacy education is often presented as an especially problematic issue that continues to undermine the economic wellbeing of nations and individuals, regardless of country. With such great importance placed on the topic, one would expect an abundance of research. The reality, however, is that little research is conducted in the adult literacy education field (Stromquist, 2013), particularly on effective practices for reading and writing instruction (National Research Council, 2012). The summaries that follow provide an overview of major focuses of current research.

Measurements of effectiveness and success.

Current evaluations, reports, and studies on the effectiveness or success of adult literacy education programs tend to ask one basic question: What works? Reports such as *Beyond the GED®: Promising Practices for Moving High School Dropouts to College* (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014) cite a growing number of adults without high school diplomas (approximately 39 million, or 18% of the U.S. adult population) who need a "pathway toward the workforce credentials and college degrees needed for high-paying jobs in today's marketplace" (p. ES-1) but who are not being successful within the adult education and GED® programs established to help them. Other reports such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS) also speak to the growing numbers of adults who struggle with basic literacy skills (Calhoon, Scarborough, & Miller, 2013). For each report issued, there are recommendations for new approaches and calls for more research on what works best for adult literacy learners. Of the reports available, however, it is evident that little attention is given to the multitude of programs established by a wide array of organizations to meet a wide array of goals and objectives. The variations in programs make the answer to "What works?" problematic, especially when it is considered that effectiveness and success might be defined differently from one program to another. A logical temptation is to measure the reading and writing gains of the adult learners, but current research indicates that when literacy skills are the measurement, adults' progress is modest regardless of program or approach (Brooks, 2010). Calhoon, Scarborough, and Miller (2013) also note a lack of evidence of learners' gains in literacy skills while enrolled in

adult literacy programs, but they wonder if researchers are asking the right questions. Rather than looking at learner groups to determine effective instructional practices or interventions, they suggest looking at the outcomes of individual learners. Other researchers suggest that there are other less tangible measurements of effectiveness and success. Lytle and Wolfe (1989) propose that measuring for gains in literacy only fail to measure other indicators of success such as meeting program goals, attendance and completion, changes in self-concept, gains in employment and income, family impact, and attainment of personal goals. Purcell-Gates et al (2002) state that, rather than the traditional measurement of change in literacy skill, the more effective measurement is the impact of instruction on the actual reading and writing practices of the adult learners. Their 2002 study of authentic instruction and adult literacy practices measured impact by documenting (1) the full range of literacy practices engaged in by the adults and (2) the change in literacy practices by the adults (with *change* operationalized as the adoption of new literacies and the increase in frequency of familiar literacy practices). Other publications do not directly cite studies of effectiveness or success, but rather make suggestions of what could constitute an effective program. Weiner (2005) suggests that local/contextual factors and the learners themselves have to be primary considerations and that successful programs typically integrate the "technical with the contextual." Brooks (2010) cites other factors that positively affect progress in adult literacy programs such as a working with well-qualified staff, relating teaching to the real world, and providing opportunities for student involvement.

The few examples of program evaluations and suggestions for effective programs use data gathered primarily through quantitative methods. Researchers from the qualitative side are also contributing to the conversation by exploring the practices of educators and adults participating in literacy education programs. Qualitative research provides a glimpse into the actual on-the-ground implementations of various programs and the people who work within them.

Educators of adult literacy programs.

Qualitative studies typically look at adult literacy education from two perspectives—the adult literacy learners who enter programs and the educators who work with them. Wortham's (2008) study of adult literacy education teachers made distinctions between the pedagogies of two teachers, Amy and Miriam. While both teachers claimed that their goals were to make connections between the adult learners' lives and literacy skills—to use learner experience as a resource—Wortham noted that they took different instructional paths. Amy took a traditional path in which she began each lesson by introducing new vocabulary, practicing the spelling and pronunciation of the new words, and then leading students through exercises to reinforce the new vocabulary. She also set aside time for learners to practice day-to-day tasks such as balancing checkbooks, filling out forms, and writing letters. Because Amy used all of the class time for these activities, there was no time for student-generated discussions or activities. In contrast, Miriam introduced new skills at the beginning of each lessons but left roughly half of the class time for student-generated discussions on topics selected by the students. Reading activities were typically focused on articles Miriam shared with the class. (Miriam rarely

used curriculum/workbook materials.) Writing activities usually involved written reflections around their discussions or the articles read in class. Wortham concluded that the two approaches offered two different but equally powerful benefits for its adult learners. For Amy's students, they were offered opportunities to *empower* themselves. They learned to appropriate mainstream ways of thinking about and using texts. For Miriam's students, they were offered opportunities to *emancipate* themselves. They learned to critique the dominant discourses and moved toward communicative competence in the larger world. For Wortham, both outcomes are equally important, and both outcomes speak to how essential it is that adult educators learn to critically analyze the discourses that surround adult education.

Rocha-Schmid's 2010 study examined the interactions between herself and parents of primary students who attended an ESL class two nights a week within a primary school setting. The goal of the researcher was to not only increase the parents' English language skills but to also increase their awareness of the activities that made up the school-lives of their children. The nine participants agreed to the same goals—improve their English and gain knowledge about their children's school. Conversations between Rocha-Schmid and the participants were recorded and later analyzed through critical discourse analysis. Rocha-Schmid discovered that while she tried to engage the participants in critical explorations of school practices, her attempts were not taken up. In retrospect, Rocha-Schmid realized that she took up the teacher role so often present in school conversations, sustaining the unequal power structure she was hoping to critique. The study led Rocha-Schmid to question if educators can distance themselves from their

many voices and ideologies and if it is possible for educators and learners to engage in truly democratic dialogue without silencing less powerful voices.

Wortham's and Rocha-Schmid's findings offer an important reminder for researchers who explore the complexities of adult literacy education programs. While many of the conversations continue to focus on outcomes, it is essential that the research field consider the educators and their influence on the effectiveness of any program, regardless of approach.

Investigations of adult literacy learners.

A great deal of the research on adult literacy programs focuses on the adults who enter them. One example is Bridwell's 2013 study of six low-income and homeless women of Color enrolled in a shelter-based literacy program. One goal of the program was to prepare the women for successful completion of the GED®. Another was to provide opportunities for the women to participate in group discussions in which they explored topics such as previous learning experiences and personal and family issues. Through discussions, they began to better understand their current situations and, through those understandings, began to question dominant world-views and hegemonic structures (Brookfield, 2005). The Shelter—which based its program on transformative learning goals described by Mezirow (2000)—allowed the women to "'dream beyond the GED®' and 'to be able to advocate and speak up for themselves' . . . inspiring greater confidence for negotiating the world from less privileged positions" (Bridwell, 2013, p. 141). For this reason, Bridwell proposes that literacy *and* human development must both be equally addressed when working with marginalized adults.

Another example, Greenberg et al's 2012 study of adults who stayed in or left literacy programs (persisters and nonpersisters), followed 395 adults as they participated in reading classes. The participants were identified as reading within the second through sixth grade levels on the Test of Adult Basic Education, or TABE (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 1994). Findings indicated that the highest percentage of students who left the programs early (nonpersisters) were young African American adults (22 years or younger). The study also identified a subgroup of adult learners who reported avoiding reading difficult materials and, by looking more closely at the subgroup, concluded that adults who avoid reading difficult materials typically do not engage in literacy practices, possess low reading self-concept, and may leave classes when material is perceived as too difficult, ultimately missing opportunities to benefit from possible program impacts (Greenberg et al).

Howard and Logan's 2012 study examined five adult males who expressed "fear and embarrassment felt in relation to literacy problems" (p. 70). Through discussions and sharing photos, the men were able to critically examine the exclusion they felt and to make connections between their literacy difficulties and systems of society. They expressed frustrations over being passed over for job promotions, being asked to fill out forms that were often too difficult to understand, and being unable to complete personal tasks such as writing notes to family members. Following the discussions, the men were invited to send correspondence to the institutions that had excluded them. Howard and Logan (2012) state that adult literacy educators must be reflective of their practices and must find ways to act against exclusion. They go on to say that a critical literacy

approach is a viable way to help adult learners recognize the sources and reasons of their exclusion and to take action against it.

Seminal examples of research that explore the diverse backgrounds of adult learners include Purcell-Gates' (1995) work with a white urban Appalachian mother, Jenny, who struggled with basic reading and writing tasks throughout her childhood and into her adult life, and Fingeret and Drennon's (1997) work with adults who were left behind in elementary school and felt that their literacy problems were their fault. While it is not accurate to say that all adults who enter literacy programs have been marginalized in some way, it is fair to suggest that many who enter programs have experienced obstacles (e.g., social location, language/literacy proficiency, interrupted schooling) in their education and wish to regain lost ground.

Research on writing in adult literacy programs.

Current research says very little about writing and the practices of adult literacy learners. The focus continues to be on reading instruction, and, with greater demands for computer-based skills (particularly as those skills are applied in the workplace), a great deal of current research focuses on computer-based instruction and the online literacy practices of adult learners. The lack of research on writing is acutely evident in 2014, but its scarcity was also felt at the beginning of the 21st century. In 2001, Gillespie stated that research specifically directed at how adult literacy learners develop as writers was very limited. She noted, however, that general studies of the social context of adult literacy education included examples of adult learners and their development as writers. Examples of those studies and a discussion of more targeted studies follow.

Adult writers in general studies.

Purcell-Gates' (1995) work with a white urban Appalachian mother, Jenny, serves as an especially powerful example of a study in which writing was part of a much larger study of literacy practices within social contexts. During her work with Jenny, Purcell-Gates discovered that "she (Jenny) had never written anything on her own, for her own purposes besides her name, a few notations on the calendar and her address on the few occasions she had been required to do so" (Purcell-Gates, 1993, p. 213). After encouraging Jenny to write in a journal and read back what she had written, the young mother was amazed to learn that she could read her own words, and Purcell-Gates realized that Jenny had never been given a chance to read her own words. Jenny had spent years memorizing rules and parts of speech, exercises that would never allow her to succeed. Another example (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997) details how five adult literacy learners navigated through stages of change as they dealt with the shame and tension experienced when they struggled with literacy in earlier schooling and as they underwent personal transformations as they began to experience success in their new literacy practices. The adult learners used writing as part of their process for examining their previous beliefs about literacy and for developing new images of themselves (Fingeret & Danin, 1991).

Adult writers in targeted studies.

The few examples of publications dealing specifically with writing in adult literacy programs are typically written for practitioner audiences, offering examples of promising writing activities implemented in adult literacy classrooms. One example

describes a script writing activity integrated into a 10-week university course offered to adult English as a second language (ESL) learners (Miller, 2012). Miller explored writing activities within the university-sponsored classroom and proposed that adult learners' needs are best met when given opportunities to integrate dialogue, collaboration, and personal voices into second language writing. This integration was accomplished through a multi-step script writing workshop in which the adult learners engaged in written conversations with the teacher and their peers in dialogue journals, collaborated with peers in writing and revising shared pieces of writing (scripts), and audio recorded their scripts. According to Miller, the peer collaboration, journal reflections, and personal voices used to audio record the scripts became an "effective way for students to articulate their personal voices in the classroom" (p. 29).

A second example relates the experiences of adult ESL learners—who were also students with interrupted formal education—as they participated in a city-sponsored family literacy program. Wood (2011) stated that, given their challenges, the adult learners benefitted not only from intensive ESL reading and writing instruction and oral language development, but also from a strong sense of community within the classroom and from instruction built on familiar, everyday language and life experiences. Wood proposed that learner-generated written narratives addressed all of the adult learners' instructional needs. The narratives were first shared through the Language Experience Approach (LEA), which consists of the text being dictated to the teacher. The adult learners discussed a shared experience, a common situation, or a meaningful picture (Holt, 1995) and then dictated text to the teacher, who wrote the text down. The class

discussed the text, practiced reading it, and completed teacher-created activities such as unscrambling or circling words. From the shared texts created through the LEA, the adult learners moved on to create individual texts, but Wood (2011) observed that the adults did not understand the *why* of individual writing and that the activities around the writing seemed artificial. The writing appeared to hit an unsatisfying dead-end until the teacher redirected activities and prompted the adult learners to create a shared text about common household activities that they read and re-read, offering assistance to each other as they counted sentences, inserted punctuation, and checked capitalization. The adults received typed copies of the text the following day and practiced reading their sentences before moving on to a new writing activity. Wood noted that the adult learners were more energized and productive as a result of working together to produce a text and that while the teacher "believed that individual writing would be more empowering for learners, … it was the group-oriented LEA that allowed learners to take control of the class, learn on their own terms, and strengthen their skills in the way that was most natural to them individually and as a learning community" (p. 244).

Another report of a promising practice is the use of pen-pal writing in an adult ESL class. Larrotta and Serrano's 2012 study observed adult learners as they exchanged letters with volunteer graduate students from a nearby university. The adult learners and graduate students corresponded weekly, and their letters became personal conversations as they discussed family, immigration, and politics. As adult learners' levels of comfort grew—both in writing and in corresponding with someone they had not met—they began to ask for advice and to discuss issues faced in their daily lives. While the letters created

social connections, the class instructors also used the letters to identity topics for mini lessons such as asking questions and writing dialogue. The researchers observed that the letters gave the adult learners opportunities to speak and write for authentic, meaningful communication purposes. They also observed that the letter-writing activity created opportunities for more traditional learning. While writing, the adult learners talked to the instructors about structure, grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and through their discussions and practice, they become more confident and fluent in their use of the English language.

MacArthur and Lembo's 2009 study provides information on the effectiveness of cognitive strategy instruction in writing when working with adult learners to prepare for the GED® exam. The researchers observed as three African-American adults received tutoring in strategies for planning, writing, and revising persuasive essays. The adult learners also received assistance in organizing and regulating their efforts (e.g., setting goals, monitoring and adjusting use of writing strategies, evaluating progress). This self-regulation was essential in helping the writers develop independence in their use of strategies (Vygotsky, 1978; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Each adult learner produced a persuasive essay after a series of five lessons that included understanding purpose, studying models, planning and writing, and evaluating and revising. The researchers note that the adult learners made gains in text structure and in overall quality of their writing and conclude that the use of writing strategies and self-regulation techniques were beneficial for the adult participants of the study (MacArthur & Lembo, 2009). They also point out that the research base for writing instruction in adult literacy

classes is relatively small and suggest that researchers should continue to look to studies conducted with younger struggling writers to find new approaches for working with adult learners.

Smith and Riojas-Cortez (2010) discuss a literacy activity implemented in an institute organized for parents of three- and four-year-olds at an urban Title I school in Southwest Texas. The parents were blue-collar Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans with varying levels of English proficiency. The literacy activity began by asking parents to repeat phrases they often say to their children. They were then asked to consider, "What would you say to your children if today were the last day of their lives?" After thinking and talking to each other, the parents were then asked to write a list of ten things they love about their children. The adults were paired up (to accommodate the varying levels of writing ability), and after writing and sharing their lists, were invited to write *cartitas de cariño* (little notes of endearment) to their children. Smith and Riojas-Cortez noted that the *cartitas* contained not only deep sentiments for their children but also creative mixtures of language and drawings to convey very emotional and powerful messages. The drawings reflected the parents' use of a developmentally appropriate medium for their three- and four-year-old children. It was also noted that the parents used the *cartitas* to impart their expectations for their children's behavior and success in school. Because the *cartitas* contained personal references, contextualized meanings, and culturally based expressions, Smith and Riojas-Cortez see the notes as a means of cultural transmission and as a way for children to learn the cultural norms of the country in which they reside while maintaining the norms of their home and culture, a beneficial "dual

frame of reference" (Valenzuela, 1999). In addition to the *cartitas* serving as a valuable means of cultural transmission, the hand-written notes were also a "meaningful and meaning-laden form of literacy for the parents" (Smith & Riojas-Cortez, 2010, p. 131).

The reports cited thus far speak to a middle ground possible in adult literacy instruction. We have seen an example of how writing instruction can be accomplished through a critical approach such as the writing done to create the *cartitas de cariño* (Smith and Riojas-Cortez, 2010) as well as examples of how writing instruction is accomplished through a balance of basic and critical literacy. The ESL audio-script writing workshop (Miller, 2012), the personal narratives captured through LEA (Wood, 2011), the pen-pal writing (Larrotta & Serrano, 2012), and the strategy instruction (MacArthur & Lembo, 2009) all contain elements of learner-centered, social constructivist approaches. Each allows adult learners to bring their own experiences to the table and to use those experiences as they work with language. Each allows learners to explore and solve problems they've identified within their own lives and within their literacy development. Each allows learners to work with others and to collaborate with more proficient English users to create or co-create texts. Each also provides examples of how the instructors included explicit instruction to help the adult learners "break the code" (Freire & Macedo, 2013) of correct English, especially as it is used in written text. There are examples of students receiving instruction in formats for scripts and plot structure (Miller, 2012), one-on-one lessons to build skills in grammar and mechanics (Wood, 2011), mini lessons to introduce and practice grammatical and mechanical rules (Larrotta & Serrano, 2012), and use of model essays for students to emulate in their own

writing (MacArthur & Lembo, 2009). The approaches discussed thus far describe writing activities that engaged adult learners in authentic, meaningful writing experiences. The activities also included instruction and support in producing written products that demonstrated appropriate levels of correctness and proficiency.

Recommendations for effective writing instruction.

In a synthesis of research on adult literacy and learning (National Research Council, 2012), the editors note that little research has been conducted on effective literacy instruction for adults. With this lack of research in mind, they point out that some of the practices highlighted within the report derive mainly from research with K–12 students and that any ideas taken from the report should be modified according to adult learners' unique needs and learning goals. With this gap in research noted, the report offers guiding principles for effective reading and writing instruction in adult literacy programs. The principles for effective writing instruction are as follows:

1. Explicitly and systematically teach strategies, skills, and knowledge needed to be a proficient writer.
2. Model writing strategies and teach learners how to regulate use of strategies.
3. Combine explicit and systemic writing instruction with the extended experience of writing for a purpose.
4. Explicitly teach foundational writing skills until they become automatic.
5. Structure the environment and interactions to motivate writing practice and persistence.

6. Develop an integrated system of skills by using approaches that capitalize on the relationships between reading and writing.

At the first pass, the principles seem to be the heavy-handed, top-down statements typically issued from government-supported institutions founded to inform and steer policy. The principles also serve as a prime example of how national-level issues in adult literacy education are often addressed through an ABE lens—a checklist of best practices. A checklist, however, often fails to consider the individual learners and the contexts in which literacy is practiced. The National Research Council, the publisher of the report, is an arm of the United States National Academies, a group of "private, nonprofit institutions that provide expert advice on some of the most pressing challenges facing the nation and the world" ("Who we are," n.d.). The report has no doubt been shared with large audiences (particularly policymakers often asked to support and fund adult literacy programs) and serves as an example of the continuing tensions of adult literacy education world. It also serves as an example of general guidelines large governmental bodies traditionally offer when addressing national concerns. (Recall the earlier reference to *Beyond the GED*® [Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014]. It, too, offered large-scale guidelines for new programs.) While this report will not guide my own study, it is important to know that (1) research on writing instruction for adult literacy learners and analysis of that research are occurring at both the national and local levels, (2) conversations on how to best assist adult learners in improving literacy skills—reading *and* writing—are occurring at both the national and local levels, and (3) knowledge of effective practices, particularly in writing instruction, is extremely lacking at both the

national and local levels. There is very little research to guide us, so it seems necessary to consider what is being reported from all angles.

Writer identity in adult education programs.

There seems to be a natural link between instruction and identity. Our own experiences tell us that instruction can play an important role in how we see ourselves as learners. Research reinforces this connection between instruction and identity by reporting that many learners participating in adult education programs continue to focus on negative schooling experiences and that they continue to wrestle with negative identities (self image, learner identity) as a result of those experiences (Bridwell, 2013; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Howard & Logan, 2012; Purcell-Gates, 1995). Burgess (2012) adds to this link between instruction and identity, but speaks specifically to identity within acts of writing. Burgess states,

> Not only is [identity] a significant factor in any act of writing . . . but it also connects a particular act of writing to the bigger picture: discussing the writer's identity places an act of writing in the context of the writer's past history, on their position in relation to their social context, and of this role in possible futures (p. 338).

Research reminds us to be mindful of the identity work occurring within adult education classrooms and, in the case of writing, to be mindful that writer identity is a complex but often overlooked component of writing instruction.

Brandt notes the difficulties in examining writer identity in her 2001 study of literacy learning over the 20th century. Her study participants tended to focus primarily on

reading memories and experiences. Few participants recalled specific writing events (as opposed to clear memories of first books or first lines of primers), remembered having their writing efforts supported by family members, or regarded themselves as writers. According to Brandt,

> Rather, writing seemed to be experienced more as an embedded means than a demarcated end in itself. Writing did not seem to be as broadly sponsored or endorsed by parents, nor did the identity of "writer" seem as readily available as the identity of "reader" (p. 160).

The adults who shared memories of writing told stories of early writing as "occurring in lonely, secret, or rebellious circumstances" (p. 154) but also recalled events in which writing brought home from school was celebrated and placed on the refrigerator door or in scrapbooks. Writing was typically presented as mundane and invisible, but it was also recalled as a creative process that garnered attention and praise from family. The ambiguous memories led Brandt (2001) to observe, "It is not surprising, given the ambivalence and vagueness that surround writing as an activity, that developing an identity as a writer is rather difficult" (p. 158). (With Brandt's observations in mind, it should come as no surprise that it was difficult to find adults who saw themselves as writers or who could talk deeply about previous writing experiences.)

Exploring writers' identities and their written texts uncovers the transformations some adults go through as they become more literate (Gillespie, 2001). In her meta-analysis of research on writing instruction, Gillespie saw great potential for exploring

writer identity within adult literacy programs and encouraged the research community to explore further.

> If learning to write is largely a process of "personal growth in the social context" (Dyson & Freedman, 1991), then scholars will have to study varied cultural, linguistic, contextual, and individual differences that come to play in this multifaceted process. Within those social contexts, microlevel analysis of how adults develop and change as writers may help explain how adult literacy learners are both similar to and different from other populations that have been studied (p. 29 of 43).

Given that very little research has been conducted on writing and writing instruction in adult literacy programs, it is not surprising that considerably less research has been conducted on writer identity in adult literacy learners. The two studies that follow take very different approaches to exploring writer identity, but both researchers saw definite disconnects between the identities the adult learners brought to the classrooms and the writer identities they struggled with as they completed written products for various audiences.

Fernsten's study of writer identity in ESL students followed a female student, Mandy, enrolled in a university junior-level writing course (2008). Fernsten proposes that many ESL writers often struggle with writing and hope to receive positive acknowledgements of their hard work but are sometimes judged as incompetent by those who do not have experience working with second language learners. She suggests that the language of ESL writers is frequently labeled inferior just as speakers of dialects or non-

dominant forms of English experience negative labels (Labov, 1982). By conducting an analysis of classroom events, a thematic analysis of Mandy's descriptions of herself as a writer, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013) of selected written work and spoken events from Mandy, Fernsten (2008) looked for discourses Mandy "drew on, resisted, or omitted" (p. 45) as she negotiated identity and found that Mandy was in a continuous process of defining herself as a writer. She negotiated two worlds—university and home—and had to learn how to integrate the language of home with the more formal academic language of the university. When doing so, Mandy lost confidence as a writer because feedback tended to focus solely on grammatical correctness. Fernsten believes that writers like Mandy need to be able to view themselves through a critical lens; they need to be given opportunities to consider their access, ethnicity, race, and class as they define themselves as writers. Fernsten suggests that this critical lens can be accomplished by talking about writing as a thinking process rather than as a "matter of language accuracy" (p. 51). She also suggests that teachers and students should discuss language differences openly and that students should be invited to "discuss sites of conflict, allowing them to stop blaming themselves" (p. 51) for their difficulties in learning to work with a new language. Teachers and students should also discuss differences between written and spoken language, language variations across communities, and which language forms are privileged and which are not (Fernsten, 2008). These discussions give teachers and students the tools needed to reconstruct themselves in light of political realities (Brodkey, 1992) and give students access to certain discourses, enabling them to change negative writer identities (Fernsten, 2008).

Another study of writer identity observed a female adult literacy student, Marion, as she constructed a text about China (Burgess, 2012). Marion was instructed to write a text about a country she would like to visit. The instructor, Sheila, assigned this topic because she felt that students should be invited to write about their own interests and experiences, shifting the focus onto what students know and can do (O'Rourke & Mace, 1992) and providing opportunities for personal development (Gillespie, 2007). After the writing assignment was completed, the researcher interviewed Marion and learned that, although she was highly engaged and invested in the assignment, it fell short of what Marion intended. Marion explained, "I wanted someone to read that and think, yes I want to visit China as well . . . and I don't think I've grasped or captured what I want to say" (Burgess, 2012, p. 226). To learn more about Marion's disconnect between what she hoped to accomplish and her finished product, Burgess examined Marion's identity as a writer by considering discourses (Gee, 1996; Ivanič, 1998) and timescales (Lemke, 2002) as described in Burgess and Ivanič's (2010) framework for the analysis of writer identity. (Their framework for analysis of writer identity is discussed in the chapter three.) After delineating the various identities Marion brought to a single act of writing (refer to Table 2 for categories and descriptions), Burgess (2012) suggests that Marion's identity as a writer was not solely a result of classroom activities. Rather, Marion's identity was shaped by events of the past (e.g., from her schooldays) as well as anticipated events of the future (e.g., from readers' responses to her writing).

Table 2: Aspects of writer identity

Aspect	Summary
Socially available possibilities for selfhood	Identities or positions inscribed in discourses encountered in various contexts in which an individual participates
Autobiographical self of the writer	Personal sense of who an individual is as she engages in an act of writing, created through life experiences up to that point
Discoursal self	Version of self inscribed in a writer's text, created by her view of the world, her values and beliefs and constructed through writing practices, word choices, semiotic resources
Authorial self	Presence constructed by a writer as author of the text, created through the writer's sense of authority in text and how that authority is conveyed to the reader
Perceived writer	Identity constructed as the reader "reads" an impression of the writer

(Adapted from Burgess, 2012)

Burgess concludes that while personal writing in adult literacy education continues to be seen as beneficial, especially as it validates writers' experiences and interests, instructors should be mindful that "in practice, a slippage can occur, so that 'personal' comes to be equated with the writer's *autobiographical self*" (p. 233)—which sometimes leads to a loss in confidence—and that writing activities that focus mainly on what a learner brings to an activity do not provide opportunities for her to think about the *discoursal* and *authorial* self created in the moment of writing. Sheila's aim to engage the writers in activities that tapped into their own interests and experiences ultimately focused on a past-oriented, autobiographical self and may have fostered some personal development, but it failed to create a greater understanding and control of all aspects of writer identity (Burgess, 2012). This understanding and control are essential if adult literacy learners are to develop the confidence that writers such as Marion are in search of and if they are to "understand themselves better as individuals and as part of society, and to envision and participate in the transformation of society" (Gaber-Katz, 1996, p. 49). Burgess (2012) proposes that instruction in adult literacy classes needs to explicitly address each aspect of writer identity and how each is related to others.

Conclusion

Writer identity is rarely acknowledged, but it is something educators must consider when planning and facilitating writing activities in adult literacy classrooms. They should also be mindful of the feedback and support they provide and recognize that reader responses to writing—whether offered through red marks, comments, or conversations—can reinforce, undermine, or strengthen an adult learner's beliefs about

writing and his identity as a writer. As the literature indicates, writing occupies a very small space within the much larger world of adult literacy research, but it seems destined to gain greater attention as the writing skills of adults continue to be a concern for postsecondary schools and the workforce. Far-reaching calls for better writers ultimately come down to individual writers and how they are supported in classrooms. With this in mind, it is necessary for educators to pay their greatest attention to the individual writer, both in the instruction he receives and the identity constructed as a result of that instruction.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction and Review of Research Questions

The case studies of the writing practices and writer identities of three adult learners participating in a community-based adult education program took place in one classroom located in a rural but rapidly growing community located near a city in Central Texas. This study explored the following questions:

1. What is the nature of writing in an adult education program?
2. How do the adult learners develop practices as writers while working within an adult education program?
3. How are the adult learners' identities as writers shaped as they complete writing activities within an adult education program?

Research Paradigm

This research was conducted from a constructivist paradigm in which I constructed understandings of the realities I observed through interactions among the participants and myself (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Findings were "*literally created* as the investigation proceeded" (p. 169). As I conducted the research and, now, as I present the findings, I do so in a manner that is mindful of the authenticity criteria established by Denzin and Lincoln (2003). The criteria include the following:

1. *Fairness*, which ensures that all stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices are present
2. *Ontological and educational authenticity*, which ensures a raised level of awareness of the research participants and those who surround or come in

contact with the participants, or what Schwandt (1996) refers to as "critical intelligence"

3. *Catalytic and tactical authenticity*, which ensures that the researcher first prompts action from the research participants and second takes action to train participants "in specific forms of social and political action if participants desire such training" (p. 278)

Constructivist inquiry ultimately seeks to create capacity within research participants to bring about positive social change and emancipatory action (Denzin & Lincoln). This study seeks to raise awareness of the writing practices and writer identities of adult literacy learners and, consequently, to encourage considerations of those practices and identities when working with adults participating in literacy programs. What is learned can possibly lead to transformations in how educators can better support adult literacy learners as they write and as they construct identities as writers.

Research Methodology

This study gathered data from observations and interviews with educators and adult learners participating in an adult literacy education program and from artifacts (i.e., adult learners' written products, curriculum materials). Given the particular context (one classroom) and a small set of participants (two educators and six adult learners), the most appropriate research approach was to conduct case studies by exploring and describing the "local particulars" of a much larger phenomenon (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

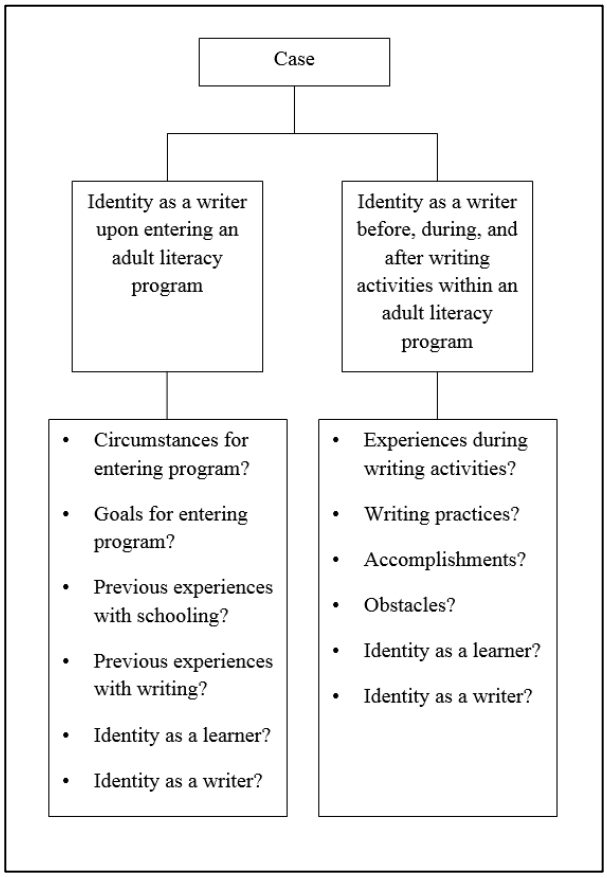
The case studies looked closely at three adult learners (i.e., the focal participants) and drew conclusions only about the focal participants, and only in that specific context;

it did not focus on the discovery of a universal, generalizable truth. The results presented here are intended to generalize only to the point that readers find similarities between reported cases and their own (Stake, 1995). Given the lack of research in writing practices and writer identity in adult literacy programs, it is beneficial to report to the field what was observed and learned as the three focal participants completed writing activities, including activities designed to practice new writing requirements included in the fifth generation of the GED®. It is also beneficial to begin to fill a gap in literacy research: understanding how adult learners see themselves as writers and exploring how various approaches or practices in adult literacy education might contribute to or detract from an adult learner's journey in becoming a writer. For many adult learners, the journey is particularly important; it is the path that leads to successful completion of the GED®, to long-term employment or upward mobility in the workforce, and/or to personal resolutions to obstacles experienced in earlier schooling.

The case studies of three adult learners on these journeys provide valuable insights into one community-based program's support of writing instruction, the educators' approaches in facilitating writing activities, and the writing practices and identities of the adult learners who participated in that program. If the ultimate goal is to take particulars and consider how they might apply to a larger context, it is hoped that these case studies begin larger conversations about writing instruction within adult literacy education programs and to consider how or if instructional practices support and encourage adult learners while other practices chip away at adult learners' confidence and perseverance and, possibly, undermine their identities as writers. Figure 3 provides a

graphic representation of what was learned within this particular context and from three adult learners who allowed me to observe, to talk with them, and to read their written products. More important, they allowed me to document their journeys.

Figure 3: Description of the case: Practices and identity as a writer



Terminology of the Research Site

Before proceeding, it is important to note that, as I introduce the research site and its participants, I will transition to terminology used at the research site. In previous chapters, I have used the term adult literacy "educators." From here, I will use the term "instructors." In previous chapters, I also used the term "adult literacy education

program." This site, however, was promoted solely as an "adult education program" that was divided into two parts: the math classroom and the language arts classroom. While the language arts classroom certainly addressed literacy skills, neither the program director nor the instructors used the term "literacy." For clarity and a more accurate account of what was observed and collected throughout the study, I will use the terms "instructors," "adult education program," and "language arts classroom."

Participants and Context of the Research Site

Purposeful selection.

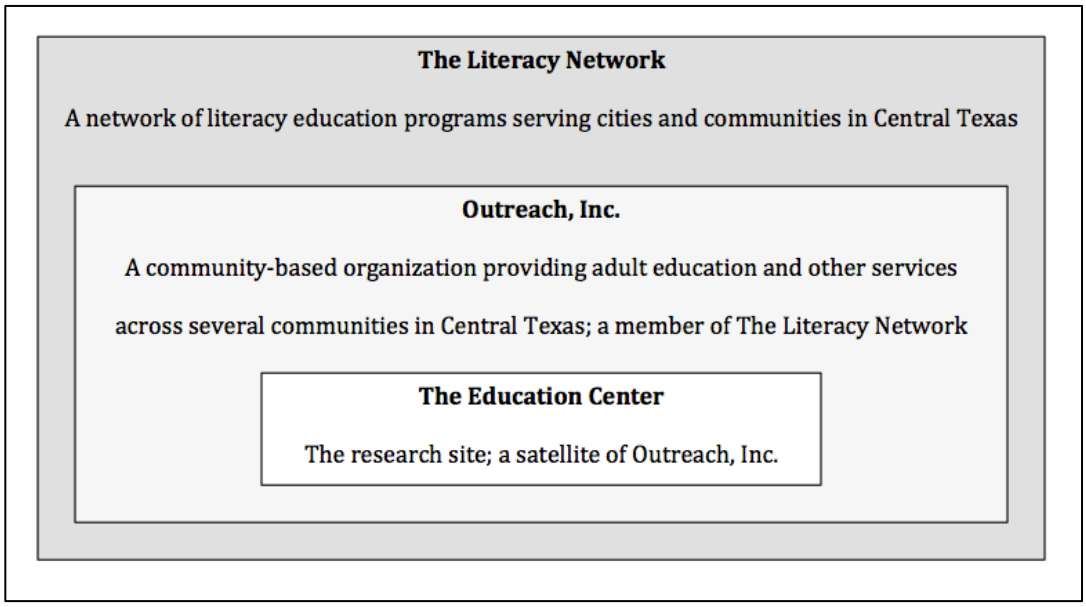
When identifying a research site, I purposefully sought out a site that viewed literacy as a sociocultural practice and that encouraged the adult learners to take active roles in their learning. I also sought out instructors who thought deeply about the learners and activities within the classroom, who planned instruction to meet each adult learner's needs, and who spent a great deal of time getting to know each adult and his or her goals for participating in the program. While searching for a site, I learned that programs varied greatly according to the instructors and their comfort levels in working with adult learners. In some settings, instructors were reluctant to engage with the adult learners and assigned "work packets" or computer-based activities each evening. The resulting silence and tedium created an uncomfortable setting in which I could not imagine completing this study. I continued my search until I found a classroom filled with lively conversations, laughter, and a genuine sense of community. After locating the site, I visited with the program director to confirm that I was welcome and that my initial impressions of the site—welcoming, energetic, learner-centered—were correct. After

receiving IRB approval, I returned to the site and met with the lead instructor to further explain the purpose and goals of the study and to schedule a time to join the classroom and meet the adult learners. Each round of introductions—first with the lead instructor and then with the adult learners—was followed by an invitation to be part of the study. Invitations were provided orally and in writing in both English and Spanish. As I settled in, I observed across several class periods and underwent a "getting acquainted phase" (Stake, 1995, p. 49) in which the instructors and adult learners came to see me as a new member of the class and as someone who was open to conversations and happy to assist.

The research site.

The research site—The Education Center—is part of a complex framework of institutions designed to provide adult education services in Central Texas. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of how the research site is situated within a larger framework. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the research site, the organization that sponsors the research site, and the overarching network that oversees an extensive list of adult education programs in Central Texas. While Outreach, Inc. and The Literacy Network did not figure largely into the study, there were occasions in which the program director and instructors referenced program and reporting requirements of the larger organizations. There were also times that the adult learners were required to complete paperwork (i.e., enrollment forms, goal setting exercises) required by the larger organizations.

Figure 4: The research site



The organization that sponsors The Education Center, Outreach, Inc., offers multiple adult education programs in one Central Texas city and in surrounding communities. Outreach, Inc. provides English as a second language (ESL) and GED® classes for adults in both day and evening classes. Classes are located in public buildings such as libraries, elementary schools, high schools, and community centers. The Education Center was housed in a converted community room of an apartment complex located in a rural but rapidly growing community. The converted room was divided into two classrooms. One classroom was designated as the "math classroom," and the other the "language arts classroom." The adult learners who attended the language arts classroom were there to prepare for the GED® or to build proficiency in English. As a result, the language arts classroom served as both a GED® and ESL classroom. The classroom operated three evenings a week, Monday through Wednesday, from 6:00–7:30.

The language arts classroom was a large, rectangular room in which one wall was lined with computers, the other with bookshelves filled with GED® study guides and other instructional materials, the other with a whiteboard flanked by two bulletin boards, and the other with a work/office area for the program's administrative assistant. There were posters throughout the room reminding the adult learners of grammar rules, classroom etiquette, and community news. There were two long tables running down the middle of the room. Each table was surrounded by a collection of office chairs and folding chairs and could seat approximately 20 people per table.

The participants.

Because the language arts group averaged 5–8 attendees per night, the adult learners generally worked together as one group, and they sat in a cluster at the end of one table and worked with Suzanne, a white female in her early thirties. ("Suzanne" and the names of all participants are pseudonyms.) During the study, Suzanne was joined by another instructor, Hillary (also a white female in her early thirties), and they divided the group into two. Suzanne sat at one end of the table and worked with ESL students (3–5 students per night) and led activities covering a range of topics—reading comprehension, vocabulary development, writing, spelling, and grammar. Hillary sat at the other end and worked with a smaller group of students (2–3) who were there to specifically prepare for the extended response (ER) items included in the GED®. She walked students through GED® practice sessions in which they planned, drafted, and revised five-paragraph essays in response to prompts provided in GED® practice guides.

The two ends of the table seemed to signify where the adult learners were in their learning journeys and what they hoped to accomplish as a result of participating in the program. The instructors and program director helped each adult learner understand the options in instruction available at each end of the table—ESL or GED®—and they or the adult learner selected the appropriate group based on goals (which they were required to list as they entered the program), data from the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), and/or personal preferences.

As anticipated, the adult learner's attendance was highly erratic, with newcomers entering and leaving the program each evening. Throughout the study, however, I identified a core group of six adult learners who did not attend every evening but who attended with some regularity and agreed to be part of the study. Descriptions of the six adult learners, including their names (pseudonyms) and their group assignments, are provided in the following table.

Table 3: The six adult learners

Name	Description	Group
Marcela	Hispanic female, early thirties, beginning English speaker	ESL
Frida	Hispanic female, early twenties, beginning English speaker	ESL
Alonzo	Hispanic male, early twenties, beginning English speaker	ESL

Table 3: continued.

José	Hispanic male, mid-thirties, advanced English speaker	ESL
Flora	Hispanic female, mid-thirties, native English speaker	GED®
Felipe	Hispanic male, mid-twenties, native English speaker	GED®

During the early stages of research, I collected data on all six of the adult learners. As I became more familiar with the group, however, I narrowed my focus to José, Flora, and Felipe, and they served as the focal participants for the remainder of the study.

Data Collection

Data analyzed for this study was collected in spring 2015, with data analysis closing in summer 2016. The data collection and analysis for this case study began with the "getting acquainted phase" (Stake, 1995, p. 49) referenced earlier and was followed by intensive data collection beginning in March and ending in May 2015. Data collected included field notes created during classroom observations, informal and formal interviews with the instructors and the three focal participants, writing samples, copies of instructional materials, and photographs of the classroom. With the exception of a few class cancellations due to bad weather or high absenteeism, I observed three evenings a week for nine weeks and, on two of those evenings, served as a substitute instructor. I exited the study at the end spring semester, which was also the time at which the adult education program closed its evening classes for the summer.

Observations of the classroom.

During early observations, I observed the whole classroom to get an understanding of the writing curriculum, which is often best determined by watching how it plays itself out in various writing practices (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I also used these observations to determine how often writing was practiced and to identify any specific writing activities or routines. For the purpose of this study, the practice of writing was defined as any text-creation activity ranging from the formal (e.g., teacher-assigned activities, worksheets) to the informal (e.g., personal notes, doodles).

Observation data were collected through field notes constructed while observing the adult learners and the instructors as they worked through various classroom activities, with specific attention paid to writing-related activities. Interactions among the adult learners and instructors were recorded (audio only). The audio recordings were transcribed and used for deeper review of the interactions.

Observations of focal participants.

Following initial classroom observations, I identified the focaI participants and received their permission to observe them more closely, look at samples of their work, and watch as they went through the process of writing. Because observing writing is a "very fine-grained affair" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 49), it was necessary to sit with the focal participants and watch and listen as they talked to the instructor(s) and to their peers. This closeness allowed me to capture the smaller details of writing—writing and erasing; starting with one idea, abandoning it, and moving to another; experimenting with words—details a researcher cannot see in a final product. I collected field notes and audio

recordings when observing the focal participants. I transcribed the audio recordings and used both the transcripts and field notes for deeper review of the interactions between each focal participant and the instructor during the completion of writing activities.

Formal interviews.

Interviews were conducted with the focal participants and instructors. The interviews were both formal and informal. Formal interviews with focal participants were conducted using a series of pre-established questions in which I asked the adult learners to talk about their purposes for enrolling in the adult education program, their experiences with previous schooling, their experiences with writing, their beliefs/attitudes about writing, and their experiences within the adult education program. (See Appendix A for interview protocols for the focal participants.) Each interview was conducted separately. Interviews were scheduled after the adult learner had completed at least three writing activities and had grown comfortable in talking with me. A second round of formal interviews was scheduled to look at additional writing samples and to talk about their experiences in the program, especially as they prepared to exit the program. This second round proved to be challenging. I was able to talk to one of the focal participants (José) for a second time. The other two (Flora and Felipe) scheduled but did not attend and did not respond to requests to reschedule.

While the interviews began with pre-established questions, follow-up questions were asked to clarify answers given or to pursue a topic the adult learner introduced. The formal interviews were open-ended to allow conversations to unfold as the adult learner wished. During the formal interviews, I asked each to look at samples of his or her work

(i.e., writing samples) and to reflect on the activity and the finished products. Interviews were audio recorded, and the recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions were used to identify key events such as personal experience narratives (Gee, 1991; Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Because narratives are both culturally and socially situated, they provided a rich source of data for how the instructors and the adult learners saw themselves and the world around them and provided insights into self and identity (Schiffrin, 1996).

Formal interviews with the instructors were scheduled in two rounds, pre- and post- study. Both rounds of instructor interviews were conducted using a series of pre-established questions. (See Appendix B for interview protocols for the instructors.) The first interviews focused on curriculum materials, personal experiences with writing, and personal experiences in working with the adult learners, particularly the focal participants. During the second round of interviews, I shared focal participants' writing samples and asked each instructor to reflect on the writing and the steps she and the adult learner went through to produce the writing. (The *steps* included activities dictated by the official curriculum as well as any additional activities and support the instructor provided.) The instructors' reflections on the writing samples provided insights into the *perceived writer* (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). The second round of interviews also allowed us to do a bit of a reset and rethink in light of the fluid nature of the program. By the second round, instructors were better able to think and talk about adult learners who entered and/or exited the program during the study and to reflect on what they had learned about the adult learners during their time with them.

While all of the instructor interviews began with pre-established questions, follow-up questions were asked to clarify answers given or to pursue topics the instructors introduced. The interviews were open-ended to allow conversations to unfold as each instructor wished. The rounds of interviews were not conducted in a way that prompted evaluation of the curriculum (official or unofficial), the instructional approach, or the instructor herself. Rather, the instructor interviews were intended solely to create better understandings of the writing practices of the focal participants and their perceived writer identities.

Informal interviews.

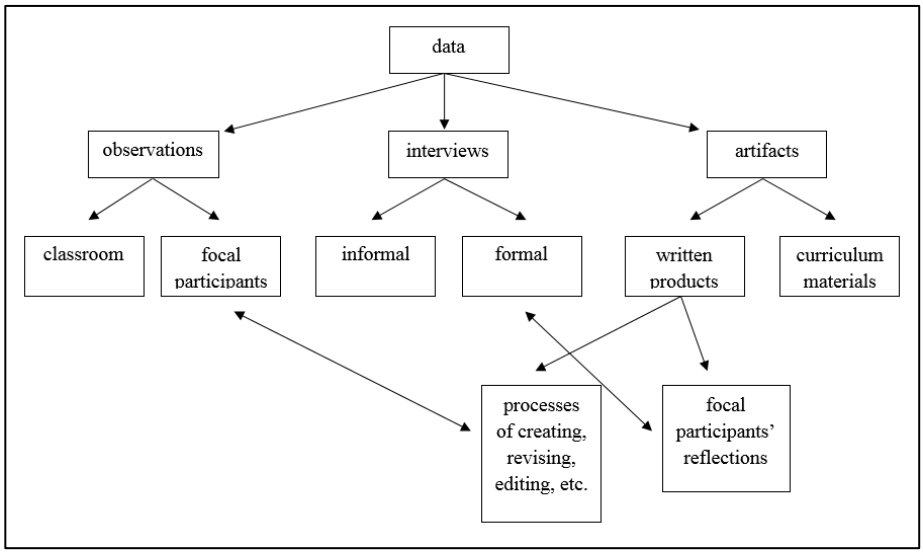
Informal interviews for the instructors and focal participants were quick, spontaneous conversations that occurred during observations. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) note, informal interviews are sometimes necessary to fill in gaps or understand confusing details that arise during observations. For example, during her observations of pre-kindergartners engaged in writing activities, Dyson (1993) periodically asked children to explain details about their activities, especially when she did not understand their actions. I, too, found it necessary to engage in spontaneous conversations while observing the writing activities of the adult learners. The informal interviews were included in field notes and were sometimes audio recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were used to fill in gaps during analysis of the field notes and the adult learners' writing samples.

Artifacts.

Since the focus of this study was adult learners and their practices and identities as writers, it was essential to examine texts as *works in progress* while in the classroom and later as examples of finished work. Focal participants' writing samples (in various stages of completion) were collected, photocopied, and returned. Writing samples were analyzed to determine the writer's interpretation of and connection to the prompt, the manner in which he organized and presented the writing, the questions/challenges that arose as he wrote, and the edits and revisions applied during and after conferencing with the instructor. The instructors provided copies of the curriculum materials (e.g., mass-produced test preparation materials, teacher-created materials). The materials were analyzed to determine the purpose and objectives of each writing activity, to understand what the adult learners were expected to complete, and to identify differences in the activities after the class was divided into two groups.

The observations, interviews, and artifact collections were designed to investigate the central research questions, to deepen my understandings of issues raised in national and state conversations regarding the improvement of writing skills, and to better understand the challenges and opportunities of working with adult writers in adult education settings. Figure 5 provides a graphic representation of the data sources.

Figure 5: Data sources



Data Analysis

Because qualitative case studies gather large amounts of data, it was important to quickly organize the data and to manage it in a timely manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994, 1995). Preliminary data analysis was conducted within 24 hours of collection. After preliminary analysis, the data was continuously analyzed because, as Stake (1994) notes, qualitative research is a reflective process in which "the researcher is committed to pondering the impressions (and) deliberating recollections and records. . . . Data (is) sometimes precoded but continuously interpreted, on first sighting and again and again" (p. 242).

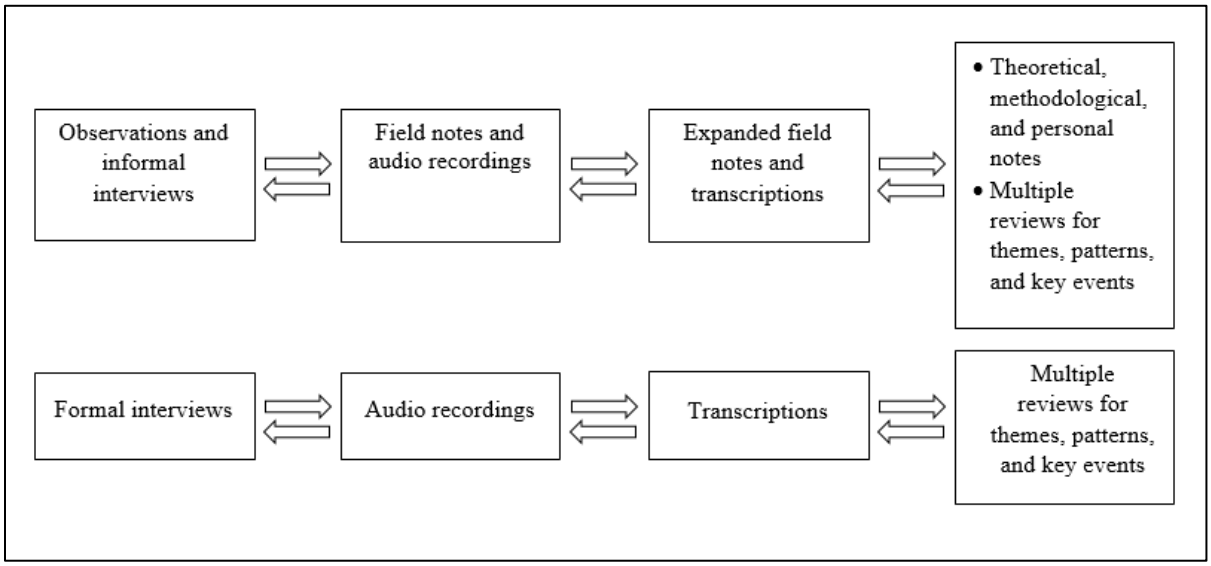
In keeping within the theoretical framework, discourse analysis was conducted through a critical lens (Fairclough, 1989, 2013) in order to examine the use of language (written and spoken) in conversations, in social practices, and in systems of thought (Van Dijk, 1989). This critical lens, or Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), afforded an

examination at the basic level of what was said, but it also took into consideration the surrounding social and historical contexts (Fairclough, 1989). Using CDA, I was able to pull apart the layers of conversation occurring within the classroom. I became aware of what prompted many of the conversations between the instructors and adult learners—completion of paperwork and performance goals, assumptions of similar schooling experiences, replication of K–12 instructional practices. I was also keenly aware of the dominant discourses at work—learning as a path to good citizenship and participation within a democracy; literacy as a neutral, universal act.

Data analysis was inductive and employed the constant-comparative method (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Immediately following classroom observations, the interactions among educator(s) and adult learners and any informal interviews captured through field notes and audio recordings were documented in greater detail through expanded field notes. The expanded field notes included theoretical, methodological, and personal notes (adapted from Corsaro, 1982) and were reviewed multiple times to identify possible themes, patterns, and key events. As key events were identified, they were transcribed for deeper analysis. The expanded field notes and transcribed key events were manually coded as I identified emerging themes and patterns. The audio recordings of interviews were also transcribed, and the transcriptions were reviewed multiple times to identify possible themes, patterns, and key events. The transcriptions of the interviews were manually coded for emerging themes and patterns. The reviewing and coding of all data sources was an ongoing process. Impressions, understandings, and meanings were noted

throughout the many rounds of reviews. Figure 6 provides a graphic representation of the analysis process for observations, informal interviews, and formal interviews.

Figure 6: Analysis of observations and interviews

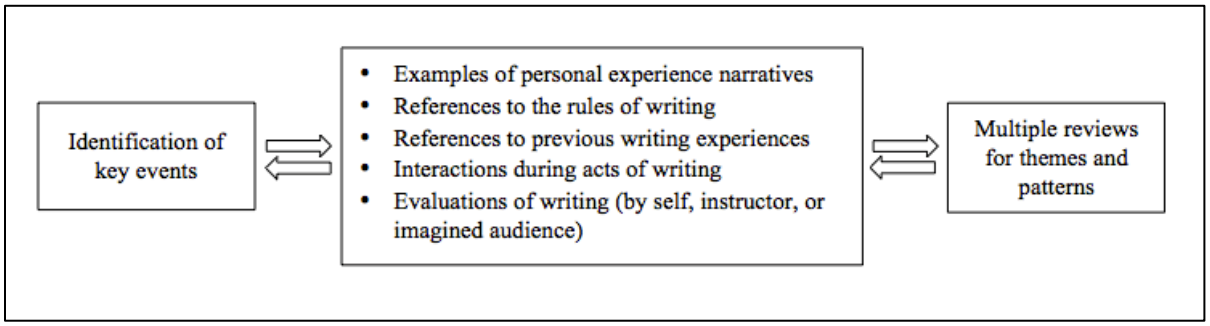


Key events.

Throughout the analysis of the observations and interviews, key events were identified and then subjected to closer analysis. Key events were selected according to how well they aligned with the research questions and how helpful they were in gaining insights and understandings of the focal participants' various approaches to writing, the writing practices they brought to the activities or developed while in the classroom, and the writer identities they brought to or took away from the writing activities. Key events included moments in which the adult learners and instructors referenced the rules of writing (defined in the following section), shared person experience narratives, and engaged in evaluative conversations during acts of writing. (These conversations usually

occurred during proofreading activities.) Figure 7 describes the analysis process for key events.

Figure 7: Analysis of key events



The rules of writing.

Key events included multiple instances in which the instructors and adult learners talked about or practiced what I termed the "rules of writing." I defined "rules of writing" as rules, guidelines, or ideas referenced or discussed as the adult learners completed writing activities. These rules included what the study participants often referred to as "grammar rules," but this term was used as an umbrella term for multiple components of writing. For this reason, it was necessary to break the references to "grammar" down into their various parts and to delineate what the participants were actually referencing. To complete this work, I assigned specific definitions to the components of writing and coded conversations and writing samples according to those definitions. The names of the rules along with explanations and examples follow.

Table 4: Explanations and examples of the rules of writing

Rule	Explanation and Examples
Parameters of the writing assignment	The rules established by the instructor and/or instructional materials regarding the amount and/or type of work that should go into a writing activity (e.g., following steps of the writing process, using a prewriting strategy, writing a set number of paragraphs, writing a set number of pages, using text evidence, proofreading and editing before turning in work)
Mechanics	The set of rules governing the technical elements of writing (e.g., spelling, including correct use of homophones; capitalization; abbreviations; use of numerals) (Wikoff, 2012)
Organization	The arrangement of ideas, incidents, evidence, or details (e.g., order of paragraphs, use of thesis statement, use of topic sentences (Nordquist, 2016)
Grammar	The set of rules used to create phrases and sentences (e.g., parts of speech, parallelism, subject/verb agreement, verb tense); the way words are put together to make units of meaning (Wikoff, 2012)
Punctuation	The use of marks such as periods, commas, apostrophes, etc. to separate sentences and their elements and to clarify meaning (katherinewikoff.com)

When coding for the rules of writing, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between “parameters of the writing assignment” and “organization,” especially when the

instructors explained guidelines for writing five-paragraph essays or topic sentences. Instances in which the instructors referenced the five-paragraph essay as the preferred format for the GED®, explained that the introductory paragraph must include a thesis statement, or instructed the adult learners to include topic sentences in the supporting paragraphs were coded as "parameters of the writing assignment." Instances in which the instructors gave specifics about the order of the five paragraphs (e.g., begin with an introduction, then three supporting paragraphs, then a conclusion), the order of an introductory paragraph (e.g., begin with a hook, then restate the prompt, then give your opinion), or the placement of a topic sentence (e.g., begin the paragraph with a topic sentence) were coded as "organization."

Personal experience narratives.

Key events also included the sharing of personal experience narratives such as those described by Labov (1972) and Labov & Waletzky (1967). Identified personal experience narratives (PENs)—shared by both the instructors and the focal participants—underwent further analysis. Because PENs have a fairly regular textual structure, analysis began by categorizing elements (i.e., speech acts) that worked together to form a natural narrative structure (Labov, 1972). The following table provides an overview of the six elements of natural narrative structure.

Table 5: Labov's natural narrative structure

Narrative Category	Narrative Question	Narrative Function
Abstract	What is this about?	Signals that the story is about to begin and draws attention from the listener.
Orientation	Who or what is involved in the story, and when and where did it take place?	Helps the listener to identify the time, place, persons, activity, and situation of the story.
Complicating Action	Then what happened?	The core narrative category – provides the 'what happened' element of the story.
Resolution	What finally happened?	Recapitulates the final key event of the story
Evaluation	So what?	Functions to make the point of the story clear
Coda	How does it all end?	Signals that a story has ended and brings the listener back to the point at which s/he entered the narrative; 'timeless' in feel

(Adapted from "C5: A sociolinguistic model of narrative," n.d.)

If an instructor's or adult learner's shared narrative fit within the structure suggested by Labov, speech acts (Labov) were coded according to narrative categories,

and research notes were made to determine how an identified PEN contributed to the construction of identity for the focal participant. Just as Labov (1972) noted, not all narratives contained the six elements, and the elements did not always unfold in the order outlined above. Regardless, the instructor's and adult learners' narratives provided rich insights into self and identity. The narratives were also helpful in exploring how the focal participants saw themselves as they participated in the adult education program and as they engaged in writing activities.

Because not all narratives fit within a natural narrative structure suggested by Labov (1972), I remained open to the idea that narratives can be both formal and informal (Gee, 1985), that they unfold in multiple ways, and that they can be analyzed using a variety of approaches (Riessman, 1993). I pieced together life stories and histories—past, present, and future—as they were shared by the instructors and the adult learners in the personal experience narratives described earlier, in conversations of the classroom, in written samples, and in interviews. The various forms of analysis included (1) thematic analysis, which focused on what was said; (2) structural analysis, which focused on how a story was told; (3) interactional analysis, which looked closely at the dialogue between the teller and listener; and (4) performative analysis, which considered how the teller used language and gesture to tell the story (Riessman, 2003). As I completed these analyses, I made further theoretical and personal notes in the expanded field notes, and I drew diagrams and made notes of how the multiples forms of narratives came together to create a more complete picture of each study participant. These pictures greatly informed my understandings of the interactions between the focal participants and instructors, and,

consequently, my understandings of the identities the adult learners brought to and took away from acts of writing.

Writing samples.

In addition to analysis of the classroom interactions and interviews with the focal participants, the analysis of the focal participants' written products provided further insights into how the adult learners approached writing tasks, how they saw themselves as writers, and how they developed as writers while in the program. One approach used during the analysis of writing samples was to track the revisions made—by both the instructors and the focal participants—as they completed writing activities. I tracked revisions by noting the focal participants' revisions in field notes, by recording conversations in which the instructor and focal participant talked through rough drafts, and by delineating the focal participant's revisions from the instructor's revisions in the actual writing samples. (A description of how I made those delineations follows.) Revisions reflected improvements the adult learner wanted to make (student-directed) or was instructed to make (instructor-directed) during and after writing and served as a gauge for what was important to the writer (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Tracking "fix-its" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and determining if they were made as a result of instructor feedback or personal decisions provided insights into the writing practices of each focal participant and into the personal connections he did or did not make when completing writing activities.

The samples were also analyzed to determine a focal participant's interpretation of and connection to a writing activity, the manner in which he organized and presented

the writing, and the questions/challenges that arose as he wrote. This analysis was accomplished by overlaying interactions that occurred during the writing activity—recorded in field notes and in audio files—with the writing sample and adding notes to a copy of the writing sample. For example, when analyzing a sentence writing exercise completed by José, I used the writing sample, expanded field notes, and a transcript of a conversation between José and Suzanne as he wrote the sentences to determine if and how that activity built upon José's identity as a writer.

As I collected and later examined the writing samples, I made note of what was originally written by the adult learner and what was later written by the instructor as she made edits and revisions. Because copies of the writing samples were in black and white and of poor quality, I converted samples to Word documents, taking care to ensure that I recreated exactly what was on the original paper, including spacing, mark-outs, indentations, and notes. This conversion allowed me to use different font colors (e.g., black for adult learner, red for instructor) to differentiate between the two writers. The differentiation was especially important when considering original work by the adult learner versus edits and revisions later added by an instructor. When the Word documents were complete, I converted each to a portable network graphics (PNG) file to create a stable "picture" of the writing sample. The writing samples referenced in chapter five are presented in one of two formats: (1) an original copy if there were no edits or revisions added by an instructor or (2) a PNG file if both the adult learner and the instructor wrote on the page.

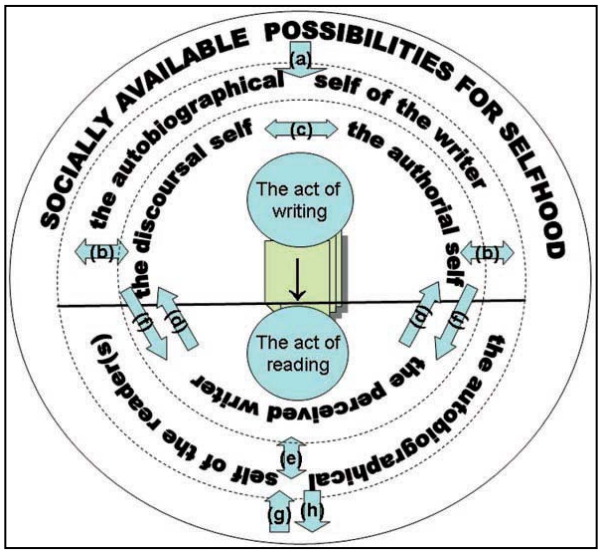
Timescales.

Because a large portion of this study was focused on writer identity, I used multiple data sources to examine the writer identity of each focal participant before, during, and after acts of writing. To accomplish this multi-layer analysis, I used a framework suggested by Burgess and Ivanič (2010), who see a strong connection between writing and identity, especially in educational settings. They state,

> Asking a person to write a particular type of text, using a particular media, materials and resources, and particular discoursal and generic features, in a particular context, will be requiring that person to identify with other people who write in this way. Writing demands in educational settings are also identity demands (p. 228).

Burgess and Ivanič propose that not only should discourses be considered in the act of writing (Ivanič, 1998), but also timescales (Lemke, 2002). That is, while examining the adult learners' writing samples, it was important to consider not only the identity the writer brought to the act of writing (i.e., previous experiences, access to discourses) but to also consider the identity created when others read his or her writing. The framework offered by Burgess and Ivanič (2010) (see Figure 8) provided a lens for the analysis of the processes (the discourses) and the relationships (the timescales) that construct writer identity. As Burgess (2012) suggested, I began with categories for investigating the discoursal construction of writer identity (Ivanič, 1998) and refined the categories to include considerations of time and timescales.

Figure 8: The discoursal construction of writer identity

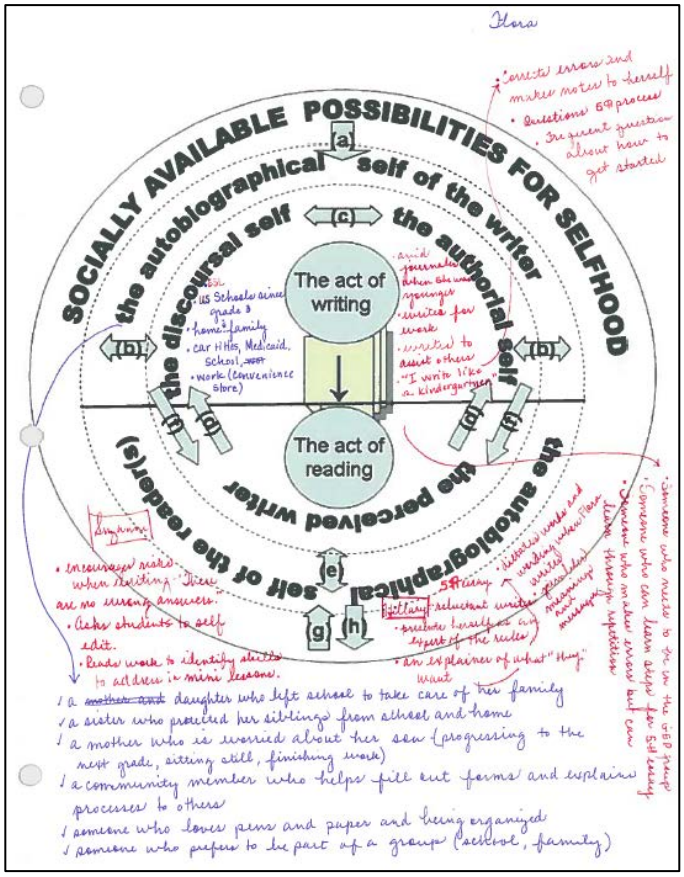


(Burgess & Ivanič, 2010)

While I did not rely solely on Burgess and Ivanič's framework, I referenced it as I engaged in continuous analysis of writing samples, expanded field notes, and interviews (formal and informal) with the instructors and the focal participants. The framework was helpful in considering the identities the adult learners brought to acts of writing and how those identities were shaped or reshaped as they talked with the instructors. For example, when Flora commented that she was not successful with an essay, I considered both her *autobiographical* self and her *authorial* self as I returned to the transcript of a discussion between her and Hillary as they read through Flora's rough draft and as I examined the prewriting, rough draft, and final draft of the essay. Insights made possible by the framework were noted and coded in the writing samples, in field notes, and in interview transcripts. Figure 9 provides an example of how I layered data within the framework

proposed by Burgess and Ivanič (2010), and, consequently came to better understand Flora's writer identity before, during, and after an act of writing.

Figure 9: Example of discoursal construction of writer identity



Researcher Positionality

As noted earlier, I am an employee of a state education agency, and I have learned through other experiences that introducing myself as a state employee often creates an atmosphere in which educators and students feel they are being evaluated. For this reason, I introduced myself as a graduate student, a former secondary English teacher, a mom, and a writer who is interested in how we as adults continue to think about and work

on our writing beyond the K–12 grades. I identified myself as a state employee as I sought site approval and as I talked to the program director (who I knew from previous teaching experiences). As Suzanne, Hillary, and I grew to know each other better, I told them about my job with the Texas Education Agency (TEA). My job did not create any concerns, but it did prompt questions and comments about the state assessment program and the recent transition of adult education oversight from TEA to the Texas Workforce Commission.

While adult literacy education was a new setting for me, my previous experience as a secondary English teacher and as someone who has worked with both adolescents and adults in their development of writing skills proved to be helpful while observing the focal participants as they wrote and as they reflected on their written products. I relied on my previous experiences when making notes of their perceptions of writing, the processes they went through (or did not go through), their proficiencies with writing, their revision strategies, their receptiveness to feedback from the instructors, and their personal connections to their written products.

I picture myself as someone who is deeply invested in writing and writing instruction and as someone who can observe activities from a knowledgeable position. As I entered into this study, I was well aware and open to the idea that writing and writing instruction could look very different across contexts. I came to this research with preconceived notions of what good writing instruction looked like, but I was committed to remaining neutral as I considered the various approaches programs and instructors take when working with adult learners. This openness to various approaches was one of my

primary considerations as I conducted the research. Ethical research was also a primary consideration. All of my interactions and activities were done with a deep respect for the participants, the work occurring in the adult education classroom, and the research process.

Trustworthiness

To achieve trustworthiness, triangulation was an ongoing process throughout data collection and analysis. Triangulation is a process of "using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 1994, p. 241). Triangulation was accomplished through member checks in which focal participants and instructors were invited to review transcripts and notes and provide feedback (Stake, 1995). Focal participants and instructors were given multiple opportunities to review data and provide further responses to what was being discovered throughout the research process. Triangulation was also accomplished by using multiple sources of data to reach conclusions and to confirm my understandings. I found triangulation to be particularly important as I pieced together histories and narratives and as I explored writer identity. I also met with my dissertation supervisor to provide updates and discuss what I was finding. We debriefed regularly throughout the analysis phase.

I recognize that this study involves telling other people's stories, and I do so with the utmost care, appreciation, and respect.

Chapter 4: The Nature of Writing

Introduction

The January 2014 release of the fifth generation of the GED® prompted a great deal of questions and concerns regarding the exam's appropriateness for adult learners who, for various reasons, were not ready to move to computer-based testing, to incur the higher costs associated with the new exams, or to take exams that had been deemed to be far more (and unnecessarily) challenging than previous generations of the GED®. Even before its release, critics and the testing company itself—Pearson—noted that the exams had a higher level of difficulty in light of growing demands from the post-secondary and workforce sectors. Pearson pointed to this added difficulty with pride, noting, the "(Reasoning through Language Arts) Test includes texts from both academic and workplace contexts. These texts reflect a range of complexity levels, in terms of ideas, syntax and style" ("Reasoning through language arts," n.d.). Critics, however, predicted that fewer people would attempt to take the GED® and of those few test takers, only a small number would pass. The critics were proven right shortly after the 2014 release as stories of dropping participation and low passing rates surfaced. By January 2015, news organizations, scholars, and public officials pointed to the dismal results of the new exam's first year in circulation. As predicted, GED® Testing Service reported a "sizable decrease" in the number of test takers, and an alarmingly small number of test takers who earned their GED® credentials—from 540,535 in 2013 to 58,524 in 2014 (Turner & Kamenetz, 2015). It was in this context—concerns about the dropping participation rates and frustrations with the new requirements for the exam—that I completed this study.

When I arrived at the Education Center in February 2015, the program director and instructors were still sifting through the changes to the GED® and, in the language arts classroom, what it meant to support adult learners as they developed their skills as writers. From my perspective, they were trying to strike a balance between the realities of the new GED® and the community-based, learner-centered program they had carefully cultivated. They felt compelled to focus solely on preparation for the extended response (ER) items (i.e., essay items), but, frankly, they saw test preparation as shortsighted and irresponsible in light of the diverse group of adult learners they were serving. They occasionally referenced online guidance and "quick tip" documents posted on the GED® Testing Service website, but they relied more on personal experiences and personal materials gathered through Internet searches and previous work in other classrooms. In short, it was an intense but reflective setting. They were defining their program in light of the new GED®, and they were wrestling with what it meant to teach writing. My appearance seemed to further complicate matters, but they invited me in and welcomed the chance to talk with someone who was interested in writing in the adult education classroom.

As I settled in and as we began to feel more comfortable with each other, Suzanne (the lead language arts instructor) confided that she was nervous about teaching writing and "hoped that she was doing it right" (Field notes, observation 3). The program director, too, expressed her concerns about the writing instruction they were or, maybe, were not providing. We engaged in tentative conversations about writing and writing instruction at the close of the first few evenings I was there. Suzanne and I talked about

our own writing experiences—as writers and as teachers—and the challenges of teaching others to write. Suzanne gravitated among fond memories of writing as a student in the K–12 system, the frustrations of working with adult learners who did not want to write, and the challenges of being a writing teacher, period. I quickly realized that not only would I observe acts of writing, I would also be part reflective, almost cathartic, conversations about writing against the backdrop of the new GED®.

For this chapter, I drew on field notes from classroom observations, the adult learners' writing samples, and transcripts from observations and interviews to address the question, "What is the nature of writing in an adult education program?" The codes and categories emerging from the data revealed two ways of thinking about writing and, as a result, two approaches to providing instruction and support. I also discovered larger practices at work that could not be attributed to a single instructor or a particular instructional approach. Rather, these larger practices seemed to define what writing meant for the entire classroom—instructors and adult learners alike. I will begin by examining the writing activities led by each of the two instructors, Suzanne and Hillary, and then move on to two large-scale writing practices that occurred across the classroom.

Two Instructors, Two Ends of the Table

Both Suzanne and Hillary became adult education instructors as a result of earlier decisions to become AmeriCorps® members. AmeriCorps® is a federally supported program that places members at "nonprofits, schools, public agencies, and community and faith-based groups across the country" ("AmeriCorps," n.d.). Members commit to community service for no more than one year, and, in return, they receive stipends and/or

credits against their student loan debts. Because Outreach, Inc. is part of a non-profit adult literacy network, it is eligible to receive AmeriCorps® funding and, in turn, it must use those funds to recruit and place AmeriCorps® members in its program. This reciprocal agreement is how Suzanne and Hillary made their way to Outreach, Inc. and, ultimately, to one of its satellite sites, the Education Center.

Suzanne and Hillary both completed their undergraduate degrees in the midst of the economic crash of 2008, and both found it incredibly difficult to land stable, well-paying jobs. As a French major, Suzanne was able to work for a short time in a private school as the high school French teacher. She also served brief stints as a waitress, a barista, a warehouse worker, and an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data entry clerk (Interview 1). During the study, Suzanne started a seasonal job as an online scorer for the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR®) writing exams, but quit a few weeks later. She continued to look for odd jobs for the remainder of the study. Hillary was a music major who returned to her university for a master's degree and then worked as a private music tutor for high school band students. Shortly after joining AmeriCorps®, she served as an instructor in a GED® preparation program sponsored by Goodwill®. The program served "16–22 year olds who dropped out of school for whatever reason, and they're court mandated to be there" (Interview 1). It was while she was working for the Goodwill® program that Hillary requested a transfer to the Education Center. Her transfer occurred during the study and required that she briefly split her time between the two sites—Goodwill® and the Education Center. For this reason, Hillary was

a part-time instructor during the first half of the study and a full-time instructor during the second half.

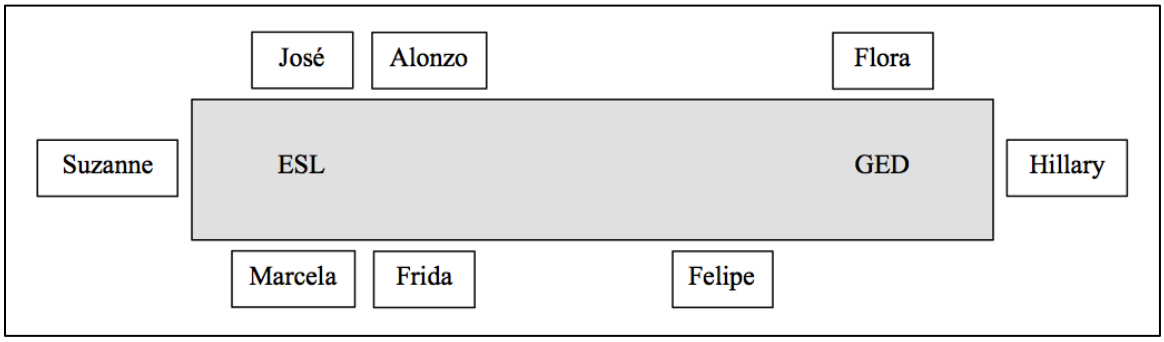
Both Suzanne and Hillary joined AmeriCorps® for assistance in paying down their student loan debts. They often talked about their ongoing struggles with their finances and their plans for where they might go following their assignment at the Education Center. (Both were scheduled to exit the AmeriCorps® program shortly after this study.) They both valued their time and experiences at the Education Center, but neither saw themselves continuing in the adult education field. Suzanne hoped to work in the K–12 public school system, but she did not have the financial means necessary to complete certification requirements in Texas. Hillary planned to continue to work in the non-profit world.

Suzanne and Hillary's circuitous paths to the adult education classroom meant that both did not have extensive experience as educators and, more important, they had no experience as educators of adult learners. As a result, they often relied on their own experiences and preferences as students as they planned for and delivered instruction. They also relied on trainings offered by Outreach, Inc., The Literacy Network, and GED® Testing Service to learn how to support adult learners. The Outreach, Inc. and Literacy Network trainings tended to focus on larger topics such a setting and meeting goals; motivating reluctant learners; and building strong, responsive adult education programs. The GED® trainings focused on test-preparation guidelines and tips. Hillary in particular had completed several rounds of training on writing for the GED®. Because she had completed these trainings, Hillary came to be seen as the GED® writing expert and as the

one who would specifically work with the adult learners who were in the final stages of preparing for the exams. Suzanne, on the other hand, saw herself as the one who could best support the adult learners who were there to improve their English skills. As a result, Suzanne and Hillary divided the class into two groups, ESL and GED®, and stationed themselves at two ends of a long, narrow table. Each was responsible for a group of adult learners, and each was responsible for planning and delivering instruction according to the adult learners' needs. The program director passed through the classroom occasionally to check on progress in general, but Suzanne and Hillary made all of the instructional decisions (e.g., curriculum, schedules, routines, grouping).

On any given evening, new adult learners appeared, joined the group, and left, never to return again. Fortunately, there was a core group of six adults who attended regularly. (The six adults were introduced in chapter three.) They seldom arrived at the 6:00 p.m. start time because of their work schedules, their long commutes, or their family responsibilities, but beginning at 6:15 and continuing until 7:00, they slowly began to trickle in, taking their places around the table, taking out their supplies, and joining in with the conversations and/or work in progress. Their positions at the table are illustrated below. Three of the adult learners (i.e., the focal participants—José, Flora, and Felipe), the circumstances around their places at the table, and their interactions with Suzanne and/or Hillary are discussed in detail in chapter five. I sat at the table, too, and moved to various locations throughout the evening.

Figure 10: The participants' locations at the table



Everyone at the table, regardless of group, was expected to write each evening. For the ESL group, writing was interspersed throughout the lesson in the forms of grammar practice exercises, sentence writing exercises, and reading comprehension activities and used at the end of the lesson as a wrap-up activity. For this last activity, Suzanne assigned a prompt, and she and the adult learners wrote for the remaining class time, usually 10–15 minutes. The GED® group spent the majority of each evening writing five-paragraph essays in response to practice ER items. Hillary watched as the adult learners made their way through the exercise, redirected and questioned as needed, and provided feedback and edits as each writer completed the task. There were a few evenings that all of the adult learners engaged in similar writing activities (e.g., evenings in which they sat as one group because one or both instructors were out, an evening in which the two instructors worked together to teach the process for writing a five-paragraph essay), but on the majority of evenings, writing looked quite different for each group. The table below delineates the similarities and differences in writing at the two ends of the table.

Table 6: The nature of writing at the two ends of the table

ESL	GED
Suzanne uses materials from GED® practice workbooks, web sites, and previous teaching assignments.	Hillary uses materials from GED® practice workbooks.
The adult learners read silently or aloud, discuss, and complete reading comprehension activities (i.e., multiple choice, short answer, open-ended response) as a group.	The adult learners read silently.
Suzanne assigns an extended writing activity (e.g., a paragraph, an essay) when the reading activity has been completed.	The adult learners read an essay prompt provided in the practice exercise.
The adult learners and Suzanne discuss, and then write. On some evenings, they complete mind maps as they discuss. On other evenings, they move directly into the writing activity.	The adult learners complete a prewriting activity (i.e., a mind map), discuss with Hillary, and write a rough draft.
Suzanne writes with the adult learners.	Hillary observes, questions, and redirects as the adult learners write.

Table 6: continued.

The adult learners read through their writing, correcting errors and underlining words and phrases they are unsure of, and hand off to Suzanne.	The adult learners read through their writing, correcting errors and underlining words and phrases they are unsure of, and hand off to Hillary.
Suzanne reads the adult learner's writing, corrects errors, and asks clarifying questions.	Hillary reads the adult learner's essay, corrects errors, asks clarifying questions, and makes revisions.
Suzanne returns the paper and invites the adult learner to read his writing aloud.	Hillary returns the paper and asks the adult learner to incorporate edits and revisions into a final draft.
The adult learners take turns reading their writing to the group. The writing activity is done.	The adult learners write final drafts; assemble the prewriting, rough draft, and final draft; and turn in to Hillary. The writing activity is done.

The adult learners' experiences with writing depended greatly on where they sat and with whom they worked. Their location at the table determined their ability to collaborate with the other adult learners, the content and structure of their writing assignments, and the feedback received at the end of the assignment. The adult learners looked to the instructors to define, structure, and evaluate the writing. In turn, the instructors reluctantly but dutifully positioned themselves as the authorities for writing. In private, Suzanne and Hillary continued to grapple with their roles as writing teachers and

how to navigate the new world of the GED®. In public, each took her place at her end of the table and served as the writing instructor.

Just Be Free to Write: Suzanne and the ESL Group

Suzanne served as the only instructor for the first three weeks of the study. Her bubbly and energetic personality instantly made newcomers feel at ease (including me), and she effortlessly navigated the various responsibilities of serving as the lead instructor in the language arts classroom. On any given evening, Suzanne welcomed new adult learners, administered placement tests, completed program paperwork, checked in with absent adult learners via text or phone call, and led a small, dedicated group of adult learners through an instructional routine she had established shortly after she began her work at the Education Center. As each adult learner arrived, he took his seat, organized his materials for the evening, and then talked with Suzanne as the other adult learners trickled in, sat down, and joined the conversation. As the group grew, the conversation grew to include everyone, and for the first few minutes of class, the group talked about family, jobs, current events, and other topics that naturally bubbled up. On one evening, for example, the group spent a great deal of time talking to Frida about her hair and offering suggestions on how to repair it after she had damaged it with a chemical treatment. On another, Suzanne showed the group an embroidery project she was working on and asked their advice on how to finish it. On another, the group shared stories about how their families observed the recent Easter holiday. These first 5–10 minutes of social interactions created a sense of community in which everyone connected at a personal level. They shared pictures and videos stored on their phones, and they

moved quickly into Spanish when they noticed that someone in the group paused on an unfamiliar word or idea. The adult learners were talkative and at ease as they transitioned into the work Suzanne had planned for the evening, and they remained talkative and at ease as they worked.

Suzanne's instructional routine.

Suzanne's routine included specific subjects for specific nights of the week. "We have Reading Monday, Grammar Tuesday, and Science Wednesday" (Field notes, observation 1). As the adult learners arrived, Suzanne handed each a series of photocopied pages, or, on a few occasions, she asked everyone to locate their handouts from the previous evening. The handouts, which were copied from a textbook or workbook, began with a reading passage and ended with reading comprehension questions. Suzanne alternated between asking the group to read silently or to take turns reading aloud. After reading, each adult learner moved into the reading comprehension questions and worked until Suzanne called time. The adult learners talked as they worked, with conversations alternating between social conversations indirectly related to the reading (e.g., a personal story, a connection to a current event) and questions on how to find the correct answer. When the reading activities were completed, Suzanne assigned a writing prompt connected to the lesson, and everyone wrote for the last few minutes of class. There were few conversations during and after the writing, but as the adult learners completed their writing, checked their work, and underlined any words or ideas they had questions about, they briefly talked with Suzanne as she read and answered their questions.

Suzanne included herself in the routine. She read, completed the questions, and took part in the conversations along with the adult learners. She also took part in the writing activities and, on occasion, shared her writing with the group. Like the adult learners, Suzanne made personal connections to the learning by telling stories about herself or her family, by tying the evening's topic to a current event, or by sharing personal tips and tricks she had learned as a student. For example, if an adult learner struggled with the correct spelling of a word. Suzanne spelled it and then shared a helpful mnemonic. On multiple occasions, Suzanne described favorite movies that seemed related to the evening's topic. On the evening the group read "Can Some People See the Future?" she told the group about *The Sixth Sense* (Field notes, observation 4). While completing the lesson titled "The Story of Stuff," she described the movie *Idiocracy* (Field notes, observation 10). Suzanne's references to movies were often lost on the adult learners, but she enjoyed talking about movies and continued to talk even after the adult learners turned silent and began to look at their phones or quietly talk to the people near them.

There were a few evenings that the routine varied, but, in general, Suzanne and the adult learners followed the same steps and completed the same activities each evening. Table 7 provides details of the routine followed by Suzanne and the ESL group. Times spent on each activity were adjusted according to the start time and the time given to conversations—instructional and social—during each activity.

Table 7: Instructional routine for the ESL group

Activity	Participants	Time Allotted
Arrival and social conversations	Suzanne and adult learners	10–15 minutes
Reading activity	Suzanne and adult learners (independently or as a group)	20–30 minutes
Discussion about reading activity	Suzanne and adult learners (as a group)	10–15 minutes
Writing activity	Suzanne and adult learners (independently)	10–15 minutes
Discussion about writing activity	Suzanne and individual adult learners as they complete the activity	10–15 minutes

Suzanne's approach to writing and writing instruction.

Of the two instructors, Suzanne was the most comfortable with writing. She welcomed opportunities to talk about her own experiences as a writer, privately with me and publically with Hillary and the adult learners. She recalled fond memories of winning a writing award as a kindergartner, transferring to a writing magnet school (with her twin sister) as a first grader, and continuing to be a successful writer throughout her middle and high school years. This placement in the writing magnet school also meant that

Suzanne and her sister were identified as "gifted" students within the Florida education system. As Suzanne stated,

> (My sister and I) started the magnet in first grade. I don't remember how much you wrote, but I liked it. I think I always found (writing) pretty easy. I was in essay contests and stuff when I was a kid. . . . I remember getting to middle school and high school and being very comfortable with essays and stuff like that (Interview 1).

Suzanne also recalled the shift she felt as she moved away from the creative writing encouraged in the lower grades and to the academic writing expected from high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement® (AP®) courses.

> When I moved to Texas, they wouldn't let me and my sister be in gifted because we tested in Florida, not Texas. . . . So that's when we switched to AP® instead of gifted, and I remember that being a big difference because they wanted you to do things in a certain order, structured. . . . All of our tests in high school were essay tests, every single one.

Because Suzanne felt comfortable with writing, she encouraged the adult learners within the ESL group to "take chances" as they wrote, and she often reminded them that it was "OK to be wrong." She also believed that writing should be spontaneous and fun, so on many evenings she assigned impromptu writing prompts to close out the reading activities. For example, after reading "Sunspots," she asked the group to imagine they were standing on the sun and to write about what they were seeing, feeling, and hearing. On the evening they read "Can Some People See the Future?" she asked the group to

write a prediction about her. After reading about tsunamis, she asked the group to write about how they would prepare for a tsunami. The group was puzzled by this assignment because they had just finished talking about the unpredictability of tsunamis. Before writing, Flora teased Suzanne by asking, “If you have time?” (Field notes, observation 7).

Suzanne’s comfort with writing also allowed her to move beyond the planned lesson and to make on-the-spot decisions for individual writers. These decisions usually occurred when writing activities did not unfold as planned or did not meet the needs of specific learners. If the adult learners did not respond well to a writing prompt (which happened on numerous occasions), Suzanne offered a second choice or asked for their help in creating a new prompt. If members of the group negotiated the length of the writing (which also happened on numerous occasions), Suzanne set individual goals and cajoled each writer into meeting a new goal. For example, after Alonzo had recently written a half page, Suzanne urged him to write a whole page. She also showed a great deal of flexibility in how each adult learner completed a writing assignment. As she assigned prompts, it was not uncommon for the adult learners to ask how they should write (e.g., Can I write a letter? Can I be someone else? How do I get started?) and for Suzanne to give the decision back to them.

Suzanne was open to variations in the lesson and in the written products. She was also open to differentiating instruction for each adult learner. There were instances in which Suzanne realized that the adult learners—particularly those in the ESL group—were struggling with a writing task, and she adjusted their assignments accordingly. For example, on the evening she and Hillary introduced both groups to the five-paragraph

essay structure, Suzanne knew that Marcela and Frida needed more practice with the concept of paragraphs in general and worked with them to develop one-paragraph responses to the prompt. When Suzanne made the adjustments, she did so quietly and in one-to-one conversations.

Writing at Suzanne's end of the table was the product of events in which she and the adult learners read, talked, resisted, negotiated, and adjusted as they wrote. Suzanne's approach rested largely in her confidence—which most likely is a product of her positive experiences with writing—and the ease in which she completed writing tasks. Suzanne, in turn, hoped to impart that same confidence and ease to the adult learners.

Suzanne as an authority on writing.

For the most part, Suzanne created a low-risk, social environment in which the adult learners felt free to write as they wished, to ask for help, and to make mistakes. As she wrote with the group, she admitted that she, too, did not know all of the grammar rules and was not always successful. (On one evening, she told the group about receiving a failing grade on a freshman composition essay.) On some occasions, however, Suzanne seemed to overlook the sense of community she had worked to create and to use her accomplishments as a writer as a way of separating herself from the group. During one writing activity, for example, she told the group about the many essays she wrote as a university student, one a ten-page essay written exclusively in French. On several evenings, she reminded the adult learners that she had successfully completed a GED® practice exam and that, while she did not follow the five-paragraph rule, she was beginning to think that it was the safest approach.

Given my presence, Suzanne most likely used these moments to call attention to her own accomplishments as a writer and to position herself as an authority in writing, but these accounts tipped over into an uncomfortable boastfulness that the adult learners often did not know how to respond to. For example, on the occasions Suzanne talked about her K–12 and university writing experiences, the adult learners remained silent, kept their heads down, and continued on with their work. Another example lies in a conversation among Flora, Suzanne, and I in which Flora shared concerns about her son and his struggles with reading and writing. As Flora talked, Suzanne saw an opening to talk about her elementary years in the writing magnet school. Flora, however, saw Suzanne's conversation as a probe into her abilities to support her son.

> Flora: I keep copies of (his work) on the walls at home, so that way he sees. I have one thing that he did in kinder. . . . It's kind of like a poster thing. It has a picture of him, and it's asking him, "Okay, what's your favorite thing to do? What's your favorite color?" Like, different questions he's got to write in there. He lacks in that as well. He's like me.
>
> Suzanne: Can I ask you a question out of curiosity? Do you guys do any kind of creative writing?
>
> F: I don't know what creative writing is.
>
> S: Creative writing is like when you're writing your own story, or writing a personal essay that just has to do with something that happened to you.
>
> F: No, we don't do that at home. I need to. Like I said, I just barely quit work, and, basically . . .

S: No, no, no! I'm just—I went to a creative writing magnet in elementary, so the whole school was for creative writing, and it just occurred to me that maybe that's not something everyone does.

F: No, I've never heard of it. I've sent him to summer school, but I've never heard of that creative writing.

I am confident that Suzanne did not intend to push Flora into a position she felt she had to defend. Rather, I saw the interaction as an example of how Suzanne's enthusiasm, her confidence, and her inexperience as an adult education instructor sometimes overshadowed what she, on many occasions, knew to be the greater good—supporting adult learners and creating opportunities for them to be successful, confident writers. I also saw the interaction as an example of how Suzanne's carefully built community of learners sometimes became fractured and frustrated. This breakdown is not surprising when we consider that this was a gathering of adults who, each day, successfully navigated work, home, family, and community and, who, at the end of the day, came to an adult education classroom and allowed another adult, Suzanne, to take the lead. There were other occasions in which the adult learners felt pushed by Suzanne, her accomplishments, and her large personality, but the adult learners, for the most part, trusted her decisions about what they were learning and sought her feedback as they completed their work. They saw Suzanne as the expert and the one who decided their work was "right."

A search for balance.

If we were to think about adult literacy continuum (critical pedagogy vs. adult basic education) and the literacy models (ideological vs. autonomous) referenced in chapter two, the case can be made that Suzanne naively but skillfully walked a fine line between the two. She placed a great deal of power and self-direction in the adult learners, but she did so within the confines of how writing is defined and measured according to the institutions she served. She encouraged the adult learners to think deeply and critically, but she assumed that they had been given many of the same opportunities she had experienced as a K–12 and university student. For Suzanne, writing is a liberating, self-directed act, but it is inevitably measured against a universal definition of what is right and what is valued. According to Suzanne,

> I struggle with correcting their work but still be encouraging. Sometimes, if there's a lot of lot of mistakes, I just focus on one thing. I don't correct every single little. . . . That has been my biggest thing. Like, where to draw the line between a teaching moment and just encouraging them to write. Just let yourself, you know, be free to write (Interview 1).

Just Put it on Paper: Hillary and the GED® Group

Hillary served as a part-time instructor for weeks three through six of the study and then became a full-time instructor after transferring from another site—a Goodwill® program located in a nearby city. While at the Goodwill® location, she served as an instructor for adolescents who were required to attend an alternative school as a result of court orders or parole conditions. During her transition from part-time to full-time,

Hillary worked with Suzanne to plan lessons and, before the class was divided, she sat with Suzanne and assisted the adult learners as they worked through the reading comprehension exercises. When compared to Suzanne, Hillary was much quieter and reserved. She saw herself as a secondary instructor in the classroom (with Suzanne as lead), so she tended to sit quietly as Suzanne completed start-up activities for the evening (e.g., attendance, program paperwork) and then followed Suzanne's lead. She readily took part in the social conversations that bubbled up while the adult learners made their way through the activities, but she was not one to begin or lead a conversation. After the class was divided into the two groups, Hillary continued to be the quieter, more reserved instructor, but she made the members of the GED® group feel welcome and took part in one-to-one conversations with each of them as she walked them through requirements for the GED® extended response items and the steps for writing a five-paragraph essay.

Hillary's instructional routine.

Hillary planned for each member of the group to complete a five-paragraph essay within one class period (90 minutes), but given late arrivals and interruptions, writing activities typically extended over two class periods. During the first class period, Hillary handed out copies of test-like items taken from GED® test preparation books. The materials consisted of two articles (which were intended to build background knowledge and to be used as text evidence in the essay) and a prompt. The adult learners silently read the two articles, completed prewriting activities (i.e., a mind map), and began rough drafts. On the second evening, each adult learner completed the rough draft and handed it off to Hillary, who read through, asked questions, and made edits and revisions as she

and the adult learner talked through problematic areas. When Hillary was through, she returned the rough draft (marked up with edits and revisions), and the adult learner returned to his work and wrote a final draft. With the exception of the prewriting activity and the review of the rough draft, the adult learners worked independently. They looked up occasionally to take in the other activities of the room or to visit with Hillary or another adult learner, but they spent most of the evening with their heads down, writing. As they completed one writing activity, they moved on to the next, repeating the same steps each time they wrote.

Hillary did not take part in the writing activities. Rather, she sat by the adult learner, observed, and answered questions as they arose. When there were no questions or concerns, Hillary sat quietly and looked around the room or, on several evenings, welcomed a new adult learner to the group, oriented her to the writing requirements for the GED® and the five-paragraph essay, and settled her into the routine followed by the other members of the group.

There were a few evenings that the routine varied, but, in general, the members of the GED® group followed the same steps for each writing activity. Table 8 provides details of the routine. (Note that while the previous table contains the term “time allotted,” this table contains the term “time spent.” Suzanne scheduled activities by time increments. Hillary listed the activities to be completed and allowed each adult learner to work on each step at his or her own pace.)

Table 8: Instructional routine for the GED® group

Activity	Participants	Time Spent
First Class Period		
Arrival and Reading Activity	Adult Learner	30–45 minutes
Discussion about Reading and Planning for Writing (Prewriting)	Hillary and Adult Learner	15–20 minutes
Writing a Rough Draft	Adult Learner	20–25 minutes
Second Class Period		
Writing a Rough Draft	Adult Learner	30–45 minutes
Proofreading the Rough Draft	Hillary and Adult Learner	15–20 minutes
Writing a Final Draft	Adult Learner	20–25 minutes

Hillary's approach to writing and writing instruction.

Hillary attributed her writing success to her ability to simply write what she was thinking, to "put it on the page" (Interview 1). Her confidence in her abilities, however, did not translate to confidence as a writer or as a writing instructor. As she and I talked about her previous experiences with writing, she did not recall specific, writing-related events, but she did remember that she was a successful student and that she never really

felt challenged in writing as a K–12 or university student. She did, however, remember a painful process that she went through as a graduate student.

> I had to take research methods and write a thesis and do that whole thing. And I found that very challenging because I hadn't been challenged in college. . . . At the graduate level, the professor—There was a course in Beethoven, and the professor—Actually, it was like a 15-page report or whatever, and he actually wrote at the end of it. He wrote, "This is a horrible paper. I realize you're on a full scholarship, so here's your C." I had to maintain a C average to get my scholarship, so he just gave me a C. . . . I tried. I went to every office hour he had. . . . I just couldn't come up with enough material (Interview 1).

Other than this one event, Hillary was reluctant to talk about writing or writing instruction—with Suzanne, the adult learners, or me. When conversations did veer to writing, she reminded us that she was a music teacher and that she did not see connections between herself and the writing occurring in the classroom.

This disconnect—a confident footing in writing knowledge and skills but a resistance in thinking of herself as a writer or a writing instructor—created an interesting context in which to observe Hillary as she worked with the adult learners. Her previous work at the Goodwill® site and her GED® training made her the GED® expert at the Education Center. As the expert, Hillary talked in straightforward terms of what was required to be successful on the GED®. She talked extensively about the parts of a five-paragraph essay—introduction, three supporting paragraphs, and conclusion. She frequently explained the steps for writing a five-paragraph essay—prewriting, rough

draft, proofreading, and final draft. As Hillary read rough drafts, she focused primarily on correcting errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Hillary's confidence in her own knowledge and skills served her well as she explained the steps of writing, as she guided the adult learners through those steps, and as she edited rough drafts. Her confidence, however, began to break down when she and/or the adult learners encountered unexpected problems (e.g., getting started, supporting ideas) or wrestled with difficult questions writers often ask (e.g., What am I trying to say?). When these problems occurred, both Hillary and the adult learner became frustrated, and they grew more frustrated as they tried to find solutions or to explain their thinking or misunderstandings to each other. (Examples of these frustrational points follow below and in chapter five.) Hillary did not see these difficult conversations as a point at which she might rethink the writing task or the steps the adult learners were told to follow. Rather, she continued with the lesson as planned, no matter how frustrated she or the adult learner became.

Hillary as an authority on writing.

Because of Hillary's intense approach to writing and writing instruction, there seemed to be a palpable pressure to complete the writing assignments and to write in the way that Hillary explained. On the occasions Hillary needed to talk about the more challenging aspects of writing—sentence structure, parallelism, organization, transitions, and references to other texts—she was unable to explain herself clearly, and usually created confusion for herself and the adult learner. She was, however, able to position herself as the authority on writing for the GED® by reminding the adult learners that she

had extensive experience in preparing students for the exam and that she had been through multiple trainings. The adult learners, in turn, trusted Hillary to guide them through the steps, no matter how frustrating or confusing.

An example of this reluctant but seemingly necessary trust in Hillary and the GED® process occurred on the evening Hillary read through Flora's rough draft about minimum wage. (Flora began the education program with Suzanne but moved to the GED® end of the table when Hillary became a full-time instructor.) As they talked, I noted that neither Hillary nor Flora had a clear understanding of what Flora was trying to say or which side she was attempting to support—raising or keeping the current minimum wage. Both Hillary and Flora grew more confused and frustrated as they talked. A portion of their conversation follows.

> Hillary: If you're talking about benefits, this is OK, but you need to find something about that. So you could say something that . . . where it talks about they can't give you as many hours, which would drop a lot of employees to part time. Therefore, they would lose their jobs, or they lose their health benefits. It's fine to say that.
>
> Flora: I think that's what I put right here, or something. I still check this out, so I should have just left it and then just reworded it.
>
> H: Maybe you can make it a little more clear. I'm gonna do it for you, but I just want to point out that this doesn't fit. . . . I'm moving it to paragraph two. I'm gonna keep reading. I'm looking at . . . These are really important. You know the

difference between those. OK, so there's three kinds of "theres," they're, their, and there.

Hillary attempted to clarify one of Flora's supporting ideas, but as the conversation grew more complicated, Hillary abandoned the conversation, made the revision without further discussion, and moved on to question Flora's understanding of the homophone "there." Hillary and Flora stumbled through conversations about organization and use of text evidence several times during the *Minimum Wage* writing activity. Flora eventually fell into a pattern of simply repeating Hillary, and she passively watched as Hillary applied edits and revisions.

This scene unfolded multiple times and with other adult learners. Hillary presented the five-paragraph essay as the key to GED® writing success and explained the steps as an orderly, step-by-step process. The adult learner, in turn, put words on paper and relied greatly on Hillary to bring order and clarity to her writing. When Hillary was not able to do so, she and the adult learner fell into confusing and frustrating conversations. I came to think of this scene as the point at which Hillary and the adult learner discovered that writing was far more complex than following a formula and rules, and neither was ready and/or able to talk about writing at a deeper level. More important, I came to see this scene as the point at which the banking concept (Freire, 2000) fell apart. When this disconnect happened, the adult learners became disillusioned with themselves and the process. Hillary, however, continued to position herself as the authority in writing and, at times, to defer that authority to the GED® institution. There were several occasions when Hillary invoked this greater authority to lead the adult

learners through a process that she could not (or did not see the need to) explain or rationalize. Examples of Hillary's statements include the following:

> The GED® wants five paragraphs, and it wants to see words in the prompt in the response (Field notes, observation 9).
>
> The GED® wants you to reword the prompt in your thesis statement (Field notes, observation 11).
>
> You're saying the same thing over and over. That's what they want (Field notes, observation 12).

In all fairness, Hillary was a willing and enthusiastic participant in this study, but she questioned what she could bring to the study, especially as a music teacher and as someone who did not have strong, personal connections to writing. She did not see herself as someone who could navigate the complexities of writing but as someone who could take the adult learners through the steps enough times that they became comfortable with writing. As we talked about Flora, Hillary explained her thinking.

> (The adult learners) need to learn the steps. They need to organize their thoughts logically and get comfortable. That's my thing with Flora. She isn't too confident in, like, understanding structure. She reads it, and she understands it, and then she's like (Hillary makes a motion like someone freezing) (Interview 2).

As I observed and talked to Hillary, I realized that she served as an example of an instructor who approached writing without a strong and/or confident identity as a writer or as a writing instructor. She was, however, committed to helping adult learners reach

their goals, and she was committed to providing instruction that, as she had been told, guaranteed success on a high stakes test.

A belief in the system.

If we were to once again think about the adult literacy continuum (critical pedagogy vs. adult basic education) and the literacy models (ideological vs. autonomous) referenced in chapter two, the case can be made that Hillary saw literacy (i.e., writing) as a skill to be handed down and replicated. She placed a great deal of power in herself and in the GED® system, but she did so with the assumption that, once the rules were in place, writing was a relatively easy process. She positioned herself as the one who handed down the rules and the processes, but she faltered when the adult learners looked to her to help untangle their misunderstandings and questions about writing. For Hillary, writing is a definable, straightforward process that can be explained with rules, tips, and formulas. As Hillary explained,

> I don't struggle with writing because I just write whatever I'm thinking. I'm just going to put in on the page. . . . It's actually just like, "What are you thinking?" It's not that hard. Here's how you're going to do it specifically. These are the rules you have to follow, but all you have to do is write it down (Interview 1).

The Nature of Writing Across the Classroom

As noted earlier, the adult learners' experiences with writing depended greatly on where they sat and with whom they worked—Suzanne or Hillary. While reviewing the data, the most obvious approach was to make clear delineations between the activities occurring at each end of the table, to follow the adult learners on their journeys, and to

report back their individual experiences. There were, however, larger practices at work that could not be attributed to a location at the table or to an instructor. These larger practices were present in all writing activities—ESL and GED®—and in all writers—instructors and adult learners. Explanations of these larger practices follow.

The histories of writing.

With few exceptions, the two groups completed the process described in Table 6 each evening. Writing was part of a routine that everyone knew well, and the instructors and adult learners went through the steps in an almost checklist fashion. For the ESL group, the routines did not feel repetitive or redundant because of the social nature of their work. The adult learners and Suzanne engaged in a great deal of conversation before, during, and after each writing activity. As they wrote, Suzanne and the adult learners divided their attention between the writing activity and conversations that touched upon the evening's lesson but also upon their work, their families, the community, and current events. (They would also pass along the latest gossip.) As a result, writing was treated as a social event in which the task of writing was intertwined with personal connections. An example of this intertwining occurred on the evening the whole group completed a writing activity after reading "Can Some People See the Future?" (The class had not been divided into two groups at this point.) A portion of their conversation follows.

Suzanne: Write one prediction for me for the future.

Marcela: I can't do that. Only God does that.

Alonzo: I don't believe in those. . . . You might have twins.

(Alonzo recalled that Suzanne told the group about her twin sister during a previous lesson. The group laughs, and Alonzo begins to write.)

Suzanne: Are there any grammar points you want to cover? Commas?

José: Quotation marks

Flora: End marks

During this and other conversations, the group made connections to previous classroom experiences, inserted personal observations, shared stories, supported their fellow writers, and evaluated their abilities as writers. As I listened to these interactions, I came to understand and appreciate the histories the adult learners brought to each act of writing. They brought fragments of rules and guidelines learned in previous writing assignments, recollections of recent and past writing experiences, and identities—positive and negative—of themselves as writers. They approached writing with an ambivalence that easily slipped into frustration, apprehension, or, on rare occasions, enthusiasm. They acknowledged gaps in their learning and questioned their correctness during and after writing.

Histories shared publically and privately.

Given the social nature of the classroom, the adult learners were eager to share their histories with the instructors, other members of the group, and with me. What they were willing to share, however, depended greatly on the setting: whole group, small group, or one-to-one conversations. For example, Flora shared with the whole group that she felt "like (she) writes like a kindergartner," (Field notes, observation 3) and, on another occasion, that she had difficulties "reading the big words" (Field notes,

observation 1). In smaller conversations with Suzanne and me, she talked about the freeing, therapeutic experience of keeping a journal throughout her teenage years (Field notes, observation 13). In private conversations, she talked about the anxiety she experienced (in K–12 and in the adult education classroom) when she felt rushed by a teacher and the disappointment she felt after completing her first five-paragraph essay (Field notes, observation 12).

The other adult learners followed similar patterns. The larger conversations tended to focus on struggles and weaknesses in writing. The smaller conversations (i.e., small group) narrowed to personal connections to writing. And, in the smallest of settings (i.e., one-to-one), the conversations moved towards frustrations with writing. It is not that remarkable to point out that, as the settings grew smaller, the conversations grew more personal and confidential. What is remarkable, however, is that all of the adult learners were compelled to call attention to their weaknesses, to selectively share their strengths, and to minimize their frustrations.

Histories as a means to lose or regain power.

If we were to look more closely at this habit of sharing histories with the whole group (i.e., sharing struggles and weaknesses), it is interesting to note that (1) the adult learners shared a common history—an inability to learn or follow rules (e.g., grammar, spelling, essay structure) taught in the K–12 system, and (2) the adult learners used that history for dual purposes—to underscore their ongoing struggles with writing, but also to position themselves as knowledgeable participants in conversations about writing.

This dual use of their histories with the "rules of writing" (a term defined in chapter three and in the following section) seems counter intuitive, but it was used often and with a great deal of fluidity. José, for example, would claim to not remember or know the spelling of a word, but as Suzanne began to spell, he would begin to talk over her and correctly complete the spelling on his own. Alonzo asked questions about end marks, but as Suzanne began to answer, he stopped her with, "I know" (Field notes, observation 5). Frida worried that she did not understand a writing prompt, but, on several occasions, she successfully wrote a response and then assisted Marcela with writing hers.

As I thought about the interactions, I could not help but wonder if some of those conversations were a result of my being there. (Perhaps the adult learners did not want me to think they did not know the answers.) I also wondered if those conversations were the result of adults working with adults and the inevitable power struggles that arise in all-adult settings. The adult learners were willing to publically and regularly discuss their weaknesses—to lose some of their power—but they countered in small ways to regain that power. It was as if this duality was a way of saying, "I do not know *this*, but I do know *this*." The following table provides further examples how the adult learners used their histories to both lose and regain power within the adult education classroom.

Table 9: The adult learners' use of their histories of writing

Histories of writing as a means to lose power	Histories of writing as an means to regain power
"I don't know (what I should work on). Commas, quotation marks, exclamation points, my spelling. It's been a long time since I write something. A long time, a very long time" (José, field notes, observation 2).	"I could look at the sentences on the handout and change them and make them my own sentences" (José, field notes, observation 5).
"I've tried this before, but I can't move from (the prewriting) to the essay. I have a lot to say. I just don't know how" (Flora, field notes, observation 12).	"But I remember you can't start a sentence with 'because'" (Flora, field notes, observation 12).
"(I'm worried about), like, my grammar. You know, punctuation, stuff like that, you know. Some spelling, yeah. Hillary agrees" (Felipe, interview 1).	"You have to have text evidence in your essay" (Felipe, field notes, observation 19).

Because writing activities were part of every evening, conversations about what the adult learners did and did not know about writing and what they could and could not do as writers appeared multiple times across all of the observations. The instructors also engaged in these conversations and, on rare occasions, admitted that they did not know

everything they should about writing and writing instruction. When this happened, Suzanne and Hillary looked to me to answer questions about spelling, punctuation, organization, and structure. I answered what I could, but there were times I had to explain that there is not one perfect answer. (My non-answers were frustrating and unpopular.) An extraordinary amount of time and talk was dedicated to recalling, practicing, and establishing rules that connected writers to past and present writing experiences. The following section looks more closely at these rules.

The rules of writing.

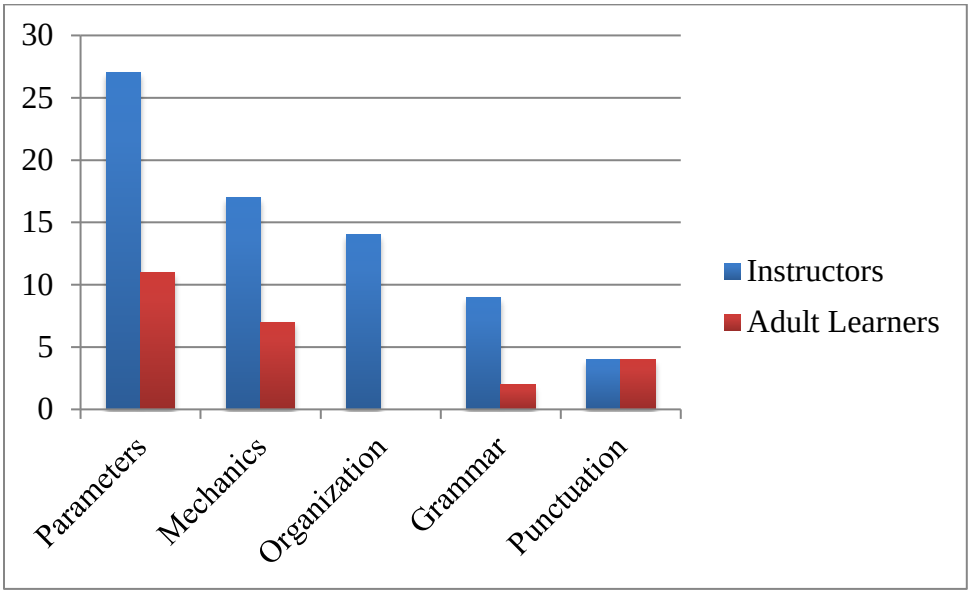
Regardless of which end of the table an adult learner sat, writing activities began and ended with discussions about correctness and the rules of writing. By "rules of writing," I mean rules, guidelines, or ideas referenced or discussed as the adult learners completed writing activities. These rules were present in explicit instructions given by Suzanne and Hillary and in discussions that occurred as the adult learners completed practice exercises (e.g., grammar worksheets, spelling quizzes, sentence writing exercises, open-ended responses), as they completed lengthier writing activities (e.g., responses to prompts, five-paragraph essays), and as the instructors gave feedback during and after the activities. The table below provides a list of rules present across the writing activities and numbers regarding the frequency in which the rules were referenced across the 22 observations.

Table 10: Occurrences of the rules of writing

Rule	Number of occurrences
Parameters of the writing assignment	38 (27—instructors; 11—adult learners)
Mechanics	24 (17—instructors; 7—adult learners)
Organization	14 (14—instructors; 0—adult learners)
Grammar	11 (9—instructors; 2—adult learners)
Punctuation	8 (4—instructors; 4—adult learners)
Total references to rules	95 occurrences (71—instructors; 24—adult learners)

All total, the instructors and adult learners made 95 references to the rules of writing. Figure 11 provides a visual representation of the number of references made by the instructors versus references made by the adult learners.

Figure 11: Comparisons of references to the rules of writing



These references to the rules—both by the instructors and the adult learners—were most often used to ensure that written products met a level of correctness or compliance expected by the instructors, established by the instructional materials, or remembered by the adult learners as they recalled rules learned in previous schooling experiences or in previous activities in the adult education classroom.

When looking across all of the categories that make up the rules of writing—parameters of the writing assignment, mechanics, organization, grammar, and organization—it quickly became clear that a great deal of instruction and conversations focused on parameters of the writing assignment. The instructors spent a substantial

portion of instructional time defining parameters in which the adult learners should write. Likewise, the adult learners spent a substantial portion of their learning time feeling their way around the parameters by asking questions (e.g., How long does this have to be? How do I get started? How do I move from a prewriting to writing?) and by recalling previous writing experiences in the adult education classroom or in their K–12 years. Table 11 provides examples of how the instructors and adult learners referenced the rules of writing.

Table 11: Examples of references to the rules of writing

Rule	Instructor examples	Adult learner examples
Parameters of the writing assignment	"To be successful on the GED . . . you must include words from the prompt in the response" (Hillary, observation 9)	"Have I written enough?" (Alonzo, observation 7) "And that's how I write an essay? Like, how you showed me?" (Felipe, transcript, observation 20).
Mechanics	"We're going to practice self editing. Everyone edits their writing. We're going to look at capitalization first. Alonzo, when do you capitalize?" (Suzanne, observation 3)	"How do you spell 'safely?'" (Marcela, observation 19)

Table 11: continued.

Organization	Suzanne tells Flora that her introduction should have three parts: first, a hook; second, a restatement of the prompt; and third, an opinion (observation 6).	
Grammar	“Second, look for verb tense. Make sure all of your verbs are in the same tense” (Suzanne, observation 6)	The two references to “grammar" occur when Felipe joins the classroom. He does not give specifics, but he states during two conversations with Hillary that (1) he is concerned about grammar and that (2) he will benefit from completing grammar worksheets (observation 19).
Punctuation	“I see a few comma errors, but it’s OK. I don’t like commas, either. I’ll plan a comma lesson soon” (Suzanne, observation 3).	When Suzanne asks if there is something he’d like to work on, José replies, “Commas, quotation marks, exclamation points, my spelling. It’s been a long time since I write something, a long time, a very long time” (observation 2).

This adherence to the rules of writing was the most prevalent writing practice observed throughout this study. The instructors and adult learners frequently talked about, wrote within, and measured their finished products against a set of rules intended to ensure correctness and compliance to guidelines established by the instructors, the instructional materials, and/or a greater authority. More importantly, it appears that both the instructors and the adult learners gave their greatest attention to setting the parameters in which the writing occurred. When one considers the power of writing, it is remarkable to think that so much time and attention was given to creating boundaries.

Conclusion

While Outreach, Inc. provided overarching guidelines and goals for the adult education program in general, the two instructors—Suzanne and Hillary—were given extensive latitude in how they structured the language arts classroom and how they delivered instruction. As this study began, Suzanne and Hillary began the process of rethinking and reorganizing literacy instruction in light of the new and cumbersome writing requirements for the GED® and decided that the adult learners would be best served if they were divided into two groups—ESL and GED®. As the classroom underwent the reorganization, the ESL group moved to one end of the table to work with Suzanne, and the GED® group moved to the other end to work with Hillary. Because Suzanne and Hillary had little experience as adult education instructors, they relied greatly on their experiences as K–12 and university students and their brief experiences as educators (Suzanne as a high school French teacher and Hillary as a music tutor) to

plan activities and provide instruction to the adult learners. All of the activities included some form of writing, but the writing looked quite different at the two ends of the table.

For Suzanne, writing was an activity in which the adult learners were encouraged to take chances and assured that it was okay to be wrong. Each evening, she and the adult learners worked together to complete reading activities and write responses to an end-of-lesson prompt. As the adult learners completed their writing, they underlined words or ideas they had questions about and then handed their writing to Suzanne, who read and talked to them as she answered questions and pointed out other errors. Suzanne looked to the adult learners to inform her work and remained open to new activities and ideas when the adult learners became frustrated or struggled with an activity. She encouraged conversations—instructional and social—throughout the evening and created a deep sense of community among the members of the ESL group. Suzanne saw her instructor role as someone who should strike a balance between finding teachable moments (i.e., correcting errors) and giving the adult learners the freedom to write.

For Hillary, writing was an activity in which the adult learners were given the steps and tips needed to successfully meet writing requirements for the GED®. Each evening, she gave the adult learners a sample test item and observed as they completed the steps for writing a five-paragraph essay. She talked with each writer at various steps in the process and made edits and revisions to each rough draft. Hillary relied greatly on GED® trainings she completed prior to her arrival at the Education Center and was uncomfortable with veering away from what she knew about the exam and the five-paragraph essay. For that reason, she and the adult learners often became tangled and

frustrated in conversations about writing, especially conversations about the more complex components of writing. She knew the adult learners well and welcomed social conversations before and after class, but conversations during class time were rare and, when they did occur, they were limited to the writing activity or to planning for additional practice. Hillary saw her instructor role as someone who knew the steps needed to be successful on the GED®. She was dedicated to passing those steps along and helping each adult learner understand that writing was a relatively straightforward process.

As the adult learners wrote with Suzanne and Hillary, they brought personal histories—fragments of rules and guidelines learned in previous writing assignments, recollections of recent and past writing experiences, and identities of themselves as writers—to each act of writing. They referred to their histories as they talked to each other and the instructors about previous and current struggles with writing (i.e., grammar, spelling, punctuation), as they talked in smaller settings about their personal connections to writing, and as they talked in private about their frustrations with writing. While one might expect that conversations about their weaknesses created moments of embarrassment or shame, the adult learners often countered with reminders of what they did know and what they were able to do. The adult learners also used their weaknesses as talking points with the instructors. They reminded the instructors that they needed practice with grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and the instructors admitted that they, too, struggled with some of the same components. They pushed the instructors to define

what was correct and expected in their writing. The instructors in turn spent a great deal of time and energy reinforcing rules about writing.

Writing within this language arts classroom served as a powerful reminder of the complexities of writing. For the instructors and adult learners of the Education Center, writing was a product of conversations and histories. It created moments in which writers and instructors celebrated clever responses, negotiated length, and reminded each other of rules they did and did not know. It created moments in which a writer and instructor grew frustrated with themselves and with each other. It was a complicated process that could not be easily managed by rules and five-paragraph structures. The instructors and adult learners were reminded of these complexities each and every evening.

Chapter 5: Writing Practices and Writer Identities in the Adult Education Classroom

Introduction

To begin this chapter, I must once again underscore how difficult it was to walk into an adult education classroom to examine a literacy practice that, for various reasons, is typically overshadowed by the act of reading. As Brandt notes in her seminal work, *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), when adults recounted their memories of literacy development, their accounts often centered on memories of reading and the positive contexts in which reading occurred (e.g., reading with family members, receiving books, celebrating reading accomplishments). When asked to recall memories of early writing experiences, however, many of the adults in Brandt's study remembered writing as something that occurred "out of the eye of adult supervision and, often, (involved) feelings of loneliness, secrecy, and resistance" (pp. 145–150). Brandt goes on to say,

> Further, whereas reading with children and encouraging them to read was regarded as part of normal parental responsibilities in many working-class and middle-class families, teaching or encouraging writing (beyond showing very young children how to form letters or checking the spelling of homework assignments) was nearly unheard of and sometimes actively avoided by many of these same families (p. 150).

Brandt also points out that the "prestige of reading" (p. 167) is often instilled at an early age, and that writing typically does not enjoy the "broad sponsorship" (p. 167)

associated with reading, even in our later years. This idea of writing as secondary to reading seemed to be the case throughout this study. From the outset, there were challenges in asking all of the adults involved—instructors and adult learners—to think about writing. When getting permission to conduct my study at the Education Center and when making early introductions, the director and Suzanne noted that there were plenty of opportunities to observe their work with reading and hoped that I would have equal opportunities to observe writing. As I got to know Suzanne better, she confessed that she was nervous about me looking at writing and writing instruction specifically and hoped that she was "up to the challenge" (Field notes, observation 3). The class schedule also reflected an emphasis on reading. Reading and writing were treated as separate activities, with reading scheduled for the first hour of class and writing assigned as a wrap-up activity during the last 20–30 minutes. (This schedule changed for some adults when Suzanne and Hillary divided the class in two.) Conversations about writing only occurred when I asked questions specifically about writing, and, for the instructors, those conversations occurred only as I completed formal interviews. During my first interviews with Suzanne and Hillary, both worked hard to recall memories of their own writing experiences and to verbalize their roles in supporting the adult learners as they completed writing activities and, for some adults, reactivated long-dormant writing skills. When asked about writing in the adult education classroom, an always-optimistic Suzanne explained, "I feel like most adult students are loath to start, and when we get them to start, they have so much to write. So, it's really great" (Interview 1). When Hillary was asked the same question, she seemed to stop short of making a connection between her

and the writing occurring in the classroom and of even seeing herself as a writing instructor. She explained, "Before AmeriCorps®, I taught middle and high school and college kids music. So, the point?" (Interview 1). As you will see in this chapter, it was also difficult to talk about writing with the adult learners. Given what I had learned through the literature review, through previous research experiences, and, now, through my initial interactions with the research subjects, I began this study with a strong sense that looking at writing in an adult education classroom would be a logistical and philosophical challenge. It would be difficult to find instances of writing, period. And when I did, what would those instances look like?

As noted in the review of literature, there is very little known about adult literacy learners and their development as writers. Gillespie (2001) points out that general studies of the social context of adult literacy education include examples of adult learners and their writing practices, including Purcell-Gates' (1995) work with a white urban Appalachian mother and Fingeret & Drennon's (1997) study of five adult literacy learners who continued to struggle with the shame of early schooling experiences. In both examples, the adults used writing as a means to explore their beliefs about literacy and to develop new images of themselves (Fingeret & Danin, 1991). When this wide, general lens is narrowed specifically to the writing practices of adult learners participating in literacy programs, the small body of research typically offers accounts of promising writing activities that ultimately led the researchers to conclude that writing is most rewarding and meaningful and that adult writers show their greatest gains when writing is practiced within a community context (i.e. the instructors and adult learners work

together in a collaborative setting) and instruction is authentic, relevant, and based on everyday language and life experiences (Larrotta and Serrano, 2012; MacArthur and Lembo, 2009; Miller, 2012; Smith and Riojas-Cortez, 2010; Woods, 2011). The activities, which included script writing, narrative writing, pen-pal writing, and note writing (i.e., notes of endearment/cartitas de cariño) touched upon the two instructional approaches described in chapter two—critical pedagogy and adult basic education. More important, the activities provided examples of how a middle ground—a balance of basic and critical literacy—is possible in adult literacy instruction. Each activity allowed the learners to bring their own experiences to the table and to use those experiences as they worked with language. Each allowed learners to explore and solve problems they had identified within their own lives and within their literacy development. Each allowed learners to work with others and to collaborate with more proficient English users to create or co-create texts. Each also provided examples of how the instructors included explicit instruction to help the adult learners "break the code" (Freire & Macedo, 2013) of correct English, especially as it was used in written text. The writing activities engaged the adult learners in authentic, meaningful writing experiences and included instruction and support in ensuring that their written products demonstrated an appropriate level of correctness and proficiency.

These examples appear to align with the middle ground envisioned by adult literacy scholars (Demetrion, 2005; Street, 2006) and to demonstrate how many instructors are able to navigate the sometimes-conflicting goals of adult literacy education, especially when situated within community programs. As Grabill (2001)

points out, when thinking about community literacy programs, there is a "rather romantic notion" (p. 1) of neighborhood-based programs. He and other researchers have discovered that community programs often have strong ties to larger institutions such as state- and federally-funded workforce programs, libraries, and school districts. This link between a community program and a large institution was certainly the case for me. My research led me to a classroom sponsored by a community organization that clearly aligned its work to the social, emotional, and economic needs of a growing and diverse community, but because of funding provided through state and federal grants, the classroom was expected to accomplish certain institution-based goals such as preparing adults for the GED®, increasing English proficiency in adults whose first language is not English, and developing good work habits and soft skills (e.g., persistence, perseverance, adaptability) in all of the adults who participated in the program (Field notes, observation 20). It was in this complex and messy setting—where schedules and activities placed a greater emphasis on reading, where the instructors expressed uncertainties about their abilities to support adult writers, and where a community-based program served the needs of a community while meeting the goals of an institution—that I set out on a lightly traveled path and eventually found instructors and adult learners wrestling with the complexities of writing.

For this chapter, I drew on field notes from classroom observations, writing samples, and transcripts of interviews to address the questions, "How do the adults learners develop practices as writers while working within an adult education program?" and "How are the adult learners' identities as writers shaped as they complete writing

activities within an adult education program?" The codes and categories emerging from the data revealed whole-group and individual practices. One whole-group practice, the focus on the rules of writing, was discussed in chapter four. This chapter specifically addresses the individual writing practices and writer identities of the three focal participants. Because the organization of classroom (both physically and programmatically) created the contexts in which the focal participants were expected to write, I will begin with their practices as learners within the classroom, then narrow to their practices as writers, and end with their identities as writers following specific acts of writing.

As described in chapter four, the two instructors, Suzanne and Hillary, stationed themselves at two ends of a long, narrow table, and the adult learners—a core group of six and periodic visitors—seated themselves around the table according to their assignments. I was fortunate to work closely with three adult learners who attended class with some regularity and who at various times in the study sat at different ends of the table. Their locations at the table and their interactions with Suzanne and/or Hillary provided rich sources of data that allowed me to think deeply about the writing practices and writer identities of three remarkable adults. The stories of how the three focal participants came to be part of the adult education classroom and what I learned from each of them follow. I will introduce the focal participants in the order in which I met them— José first, then Flora, then Felipe.

José

Of the three focal participants, José had participated in the adult education program the longest and was the one who most eagerly responded to my invitation to participate in the study. I met José during my first visit to the classroom, and from that first evening, he worked especially hard to capture and keep my attention. His enthusiasm was evident in an early, informal conversation when he told me that he considered himself to be a writer and that he hoped to one day write a book. His enthusiasm seemed to wane, however, when we sat down for the first formal interview. At one point, he admitted that he found writing to be "pretty difficult," and, in light of his long days, he didn't have time to write. According to José,

> Yeah, I like to write, but sometime, right now it's like pretty hard. But when you're in school, you get the hang of it. You read stories, and they ask you to write something about it. And it's pretty easy to do that. But right now, when I'm starting in here, it's pretty difficult. . . . I do not do any writing at my house. I don't have much time, you know? I get up early and come back to my house pretty late. So, I have no time. Sometimes when I do, it's like 9:00, 10:00. I don't write (Interview 1).

José started the program in February 2015 (Interview 1). He was there when I began the study, he attended regularly, and he planned to continue to attend classes throughout the approaching summer (Interview 2). (I exited the program at the end of the spring semester and was unable to confirm his continued participation.) During the first

interview, I asked José his reason for attending the adult education program, to which he replied,

> For me, it's more like to get my GED® and try to go to college because I work in construction, and I don't want to keep doing that for more years. I want to do something else where I can take it more easy.

This desire to "do something else" came up several times during the study. Because the study began in March and ended in May, the participants and I watched the days grow longer and warmer (much warmer) and the rains fall endlessly as we transitioned from early to late spring. It is important to note here that as the days grew longer, the adult learners' work hours began to extend later into the evening. As a result, by mid-April few of the adult learners arrived by the 6:00 start time, and, by May, Suzanne, Hillary, and I frequently spent the first 20–30 minutes of class sitting at the table by ourselves. Because success in the residential construction business depends greatly on daylight and good weather, José's work hours grew longer, and, as the study progressed, a once punctual José began to arrive later and later, if at all. When he did arrive, he told us about his day working under the intense Texas sun (something he greatly disliked) and the increasing demands of his job. It was the unpredictable rain, the continuous exposure to the sun, and the long days that prompted José to frequently talk about doing something else, and that *something else* was possible if he achieved his goals of passing the GED® and attending a nearby community college. He also wanted his oldest child, a son, to see opportunities beyond the construction field. As José explained,

> One thing I tell my son right now—he's 13—he can do a lot of things by going to school. That something that I didn't, I wasn't able to do, but I want him to do it because it's better to study than working outside in the sun. It's to get a better job. . . . One thing I do, I take him with me to work just to let him know how work is outside, to make him feel what I feel, like being to work outside. . . . He thinks it's pretty hard. He gets all sweaty (Interview 1).

José often talked about his son and his other four children during class, especially as he and the other adult learners worked through reading comprehension and grammar exercises with the ESL group. He seemed to be at ease at that end of the table and knew each of the other participants well. On a few occasions, he expressed a desire to move to the GED® group, but he would later change his mind. When looking back at his K–12 schooling experience, José felt that he had experienced a gap in learning English after his family moved from North Carolina to Texas and, years later, he believed that he still did not know enough English or grammar to be successful on the GED® (Interview 1). For this reason, José settled in at the ESL end of the table and worked with Suzanne throughout the entire study. He was comfortable with Suzanne and her routines and with the continuous practice of learning new words—their meanings, their spellings, and their correct use in sentences.

The following sections look at José as a learner and a writer by exploring themes identified through the analysis of observations, interviews (both formal and informal), and writing samples. I will first describe José's practices as a learner in the classroom and then narrow my focus to his practices and identity as a writer. You will most likely notice

that each theme circles back to the idea that José focused a great deal on correctness—both in being right and in conforming to what he perceived to be the norms of the adult education classroom.

José's practices as a learner in the adult education classroom.

José quickly caught my attention because he was talkative and friendly. He found great satisfaction in calling out answers and in completing activities before the other adults. He listened carefully as the other adults read aloud, but he was also quick to correct their reading errors or to call out words if they paused (Field notes, observation 2). I wondered if this enthusiasm was a temporary behavior intended to capture my attention, but it became clear several weeks into the study that this was normal for José. He liked to be right, and he liked to let the other adults know he was right. In spite of his long workdays, José attended class regularly and was typically one of the first to arrive. He tried to keep himself organized by keeping his work in a folder, but he often spent a few minutes each evening looking for papers that ultimately could not be found. There were several instances in which he had to ask Suzanne for replacement worksheets or put off completing work in the hope that he would find the lost papers at home. He primarily spoke English, but he would occasionally switch to Spanish to explain a word or idea to another adult learner. Just as with most of the other adult learners, José often looked at his phone to text, to use applications that translated words and phrases from Spanish to English, and to search the web, sometimes for images or websites related to the evening's reading topic.

When asked about his strengths as a K–12 student, José recalled, “I liked math. That was my favorite subject, but I just forgot everything. The thing I like in math is that you use math for everything” (Interview 1). As we talked about his strengths as an adult learner, however, José felt that his strengths now lie in reading (Interview 1) and that, if he were going to take a GED® practice test in the near future, he would most likely practice with social studies, reading, or writing. As José noted, “I mean, those are, like, kind of a pain, but I can try to do it. Mostly I know mostly everything, but math is the hardest one” (Interview 2).

Being the one who is right.

Anyone who has been in a classroom can most likely recall the student who enjoyed being the one finished his work first, who knew the answers, and who, in general, worked diligently to stay ahead of the others—both in being first and in being right. José was this student in the adult education classroom. The interesting part, however, was that there was no need for José to operate within this hurried, personal sense of competition. The other adult learners did not exhibit this same sense of urgency and competitiveness. After examining his interactions with the instructors and the other adult learners, I came to realize that if José had paused in his push to be first, he would have noticed that the other adults had come to depend on José to provide the answers and to keep the conversations moving. When Suzanne asked for answers to reading comprehension questions, it was José who called out the answers (unless Suzanne specifically asked another adult to reply). When another adult learner stumbled in reading, it was José who called out the troublesome word or provided a Spanish

translation. When Suzanne began a discussion, it was José who replied first and who kept the conversation going as the other adult learners quietly listened. When another adult began to talk, it was José who talked over him or her and, as a result, rerouted the attention back to himself. (This talking over typically occurred when José was especially enthusiastic or knowledgeable about a topic.) Granted, this final example brings to light that José's drive could sometimes silence the other adult learners, but José's enthusiasm seemed to define the class ethos. He brought liveliness and humor to the group, and the other adults seemed to appreciate his outgoing nature.

As I thought about José and his drive to be right, I created an extensive list of events that took place during observations and interviews in which José spoke up, spoke over, and/or spoke out, and, consequently, enacted what I came to see as José's various forms of *correctness*. For José, being correct meant knowing the right answer, which he often did. (He was *correct* as a student.) It also meant feeling confident and certain of the work he was completing, so much so that he sometimes took his turn at providing instruction to the other adult learners. (He helped other students be *correct*.) It meant acknowledging what he perceived to be gaps in his learning and understanding and pointing to those gaps as he explained his current status as an adult learner. (He recognized that he was not always *correct*.) It also meant being mindful of the social connections made among himself, Suzanne, and the other adult learners, both in how he felt and how he made others feel. (He felt that there was a *correct* way in which he and others should behave.) The table below provides definitions/descriptions of José's varying forms of correctness.

Table 12: Descriptions and examples of José's forms of correctness

Form	Description	Example
Confidence in knowledge	José feels confident in his knowledge and understanding of certain topics and activities. This confidence empowers José to teach (and, at times, to act as a second teacher for) the adult learners of the ESL group.	José provides Spanish cognates when the adult learners encounter new vocabulary.
Correct answers for the group	José says answers aloud (prompted and unprompted), thereby demonstrating to Suzanne and the adult learners that he knows the correct answer.	When Suzanne takes the adult learners through reading comprehension checks, José is often the only adult to call out the answers.
Mindfulness of others	José perceives how others—especially Suzanne—respond to him and/or his actions. He regulates his actions in response to those perceptions.	If Suzanne seems displeased with a statement made by José, he revises his statement.

Table 12: continued.

Self-labeling of gaps in learning	José voluntarily points out gaps in his learning. This acknowledgement seems to empower José, giving him the ability to name what he does not know and to assign blame to systems, others, etc.	José sites his limited English vocabulary, a result of his K–12 experience, as an obstacle he must overcome as he prepares for the GED® and future schooling.

The most noticeable practice in José's pursuit of correctness was his ease in moving between the teacher and student role. On any given night, he would serve as both teacher and student and would sometimes create a context in which Suzanne answered to him. For example, on the evening the group read "Can Some People See into the Future?", José quickly and confidently answered Suzanne's vocabulary questions. After writing "doom" on the board, Suzanne asked the adult learners if they knew what it meant. José promptly answered and then launched into a back and forth in which he and Suzanne were the only speakers. Part of their conversation follows.

Suzanne: What is doom?

José: It's a bad ending.

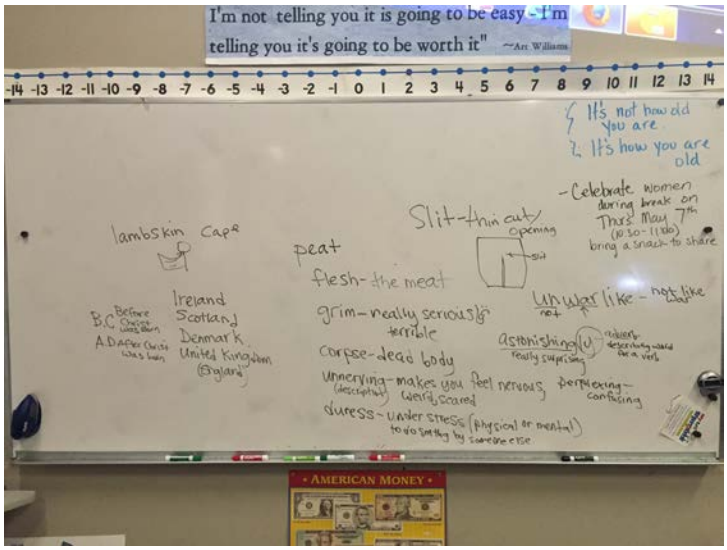
S: What are doomed?

J: The race

S: What is the race called?

José found the answer to this question by looking back at the reading passage, “The Seer ‘proclaimed the Doom of the Seaforths’” (handout, “Can Some People See into the Future?, p. 86). This back and forth continued between Suzanne and José without the participation of the other adult learners. A similar conversation occurred on another evening after reading “Secrets of the Bog People,” but this time, José served as the one to call out words and Suzanne as the one who provided the answers. Suzanne wrote the words and their definitions on the whiteboard as she and José engaged once again in a rapid back and forth of words.

Figure 12: Vocabulary for “Secrets of the Bog People”



There were instances in which Suzanne talked with other adults who provided correct answers to her questions and who asked questions of her, but these instances typically occurred on evenings that José was not there. If José was present, he took the lead in talking to Suzanne and in calling out the correct answers.

José enjoyed being right in front of the other adults, but he also enacted this correctness when he was away from the group. During our first interview, José explained the circumstances around his leaving the K–12 system, and, more important, the reasons for his lack of success as a young student—his family's move to Texas and his inability to become proficient in English. I found this form of correctness—the ability to acknowledge and label his gaps in learning—an empowering form of correctness for José.

> Well actually, I started school in North Carolina, but a few years ago, my family, they used to move a lot from one state to another, so I didn't have a chance to finish one year in this school. I think that was one of my problems, why I didn't learn how to speak very good English. Once we move to (Texas) and we stay here, at school, they only speak Spanish, so I started speaking Spanish. . . . Yeah, that was one of my biggest problems, like moving from one school to another. It's very different. Everything that I learned, it was from North Carolina. I thought it was very good over there, but once we moved here, everything changed. . . . I was doing pretty bad. (My dad) asked me if I was going to study or not, so I told him that I—I didn't want to study at that time—so I told him that I preferred to work, and I went to work.

José's recollection of his early school experience hit upon several big ideas that he continued to circle back to throughout the study: fond memories of early experiences in North Carolina, the challenges of changing schools, and the frustrations of not becoming proficient in English. Because I have a working knowledge of the history of

bilingual/ESL education in Texas, I was puzzled by José's reference to speaking only Spanish while he was enrolled in a Texas public school. During my analysis, I confirmed that at the time José was a K–12 student, Texas schools typically provided bilingual or ESL instruction. There were not, however, Spanish-only programs. If this was José's experience, it was most likely an instructional decision made at the campus or teacher level.

At the end of my study, I met with José to complete a second and final interview. During our conversation, I was reminded once more of José's desire to be right. José started the conversation with a little hesitancy, but his confidence in himself and in his abilities reappeared as we discussed the possibility of him taking a GED® practice test. (The adult learners see practice tests as a critical step in the preparation process. Because a test taker must pay a fee to take a GED® exam, he typically completes several rounds of free practice tests to ensure that he is ready and that he has a high chance of passing, thereby minimizing the risk of having to pay for a second test. At the time of this study, the fee for taking the GED® exam was $33.75 for one and $135 for the series of four, a costly amount for many test takers.) He tempered his confidence, however, with a kind of "we'll see what happens" approach. I had asked José about his readiness to write for the GED®, but he steered our conversation towards thinking about the exam in general.

> José: Yeah, I will take the practice test to see how it is. I don't know, probably take it from there. Sign up and see what kind of questions they ask.
>
> KB: Which (exam) do you think you know the most about?

J: Uh, probably between social studies and reading, writing, or, I might, I mean those are, like, kind of a pain, but I can try to do it. Mostly, I know mostly everything, but math is the hardest one because there are several parts to it. And, like, social studies, you just got to read carefully and try to come up with the best answer. And, I mean, writing, it's not that really hard to write. You've just got to think.

As we continued to talk, I was also reminded that José is mindful of how he is perceived by others. The conversation below speaks to that mindfulness. It also speaks a great deal to José's identity as a writer.

KB: When you write, do you think about other people reading it? For instance, when I ask for a copy of your writing, or when Suzanne . . .

J: Yes, I do.

KB: What do you think about?

J: It worries me because I'm that type of person that I don't know what you're going to think about it, if it's going to be OK or bad or—I'm those type of people that think about other people.

José seemed most comfortable when he worked within a context that valued correctness. He expected much from himself as he completed his work and as he interacted with the other adults. In return, he also expected correctness from Suzanne, from the instruction she provided, and from the activities she led the adult learners through. He wanted relevance and truthfulness in what he was learning, so he often acted as the one who questioned the relevance of a lesson or, if he was so inclined, to explain a

lesson's relevance to the other adult learners. His explanations were also a good opportunity for him to show the other adults that he understood the lesson to a greater degree than what was being discussed within the classroom. One might say this was another way of José being right. Not only did José understand what he had just read or what was being discussed, he also saw connections between that night's learning and what he knew about the larger world.

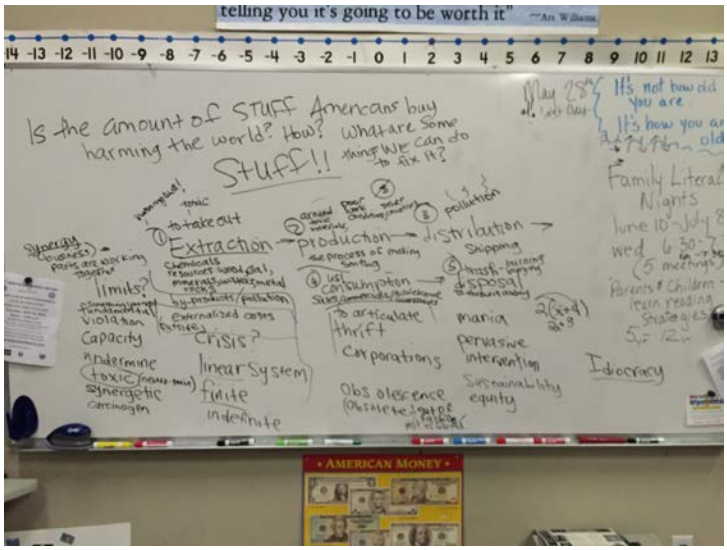
Connecting to real world events.

The ESL group's reading activities were almost always followed by lively, thoughtful discussion. For example, after reading "Can Some People See the Future?", the group began to talk about a person's ability to predict the future—an intriguing idea for most of the group, and an intriguing conversation to listen to. Because the participants in this conversation were adults who could critically examine claims of people predicting the future, they were quite invested in the topic. Marcela, for example, explained to the group that, because of her religious beliefs, she would not be part of the conversation. Alonzo and Frida, however, began to share stories about people they knew who visited psychics. As Alonzo talked, he noted that psychics' predictions are often wrong, and José followed up Alonzo's observation by reminding everyone of Y2K—the supposed computer bug that would cause all computer-based systems to crash at the turn of the century, the year 2000. José reminded the group, "Everyone was worried, but it wasn't a big deal." While some of the group members had not heard of Y2K, others instantly made the connection and agreed. Later that evening, Suzanne asked the group if anyone there was afraid to fly in airplanes. Her question prompted a quick discussion during

which José told the group that he was afraid to fly, and he reminded them of the recent crash of Germanwings Flight 9525, the crash that investigators later discovered was caused by a pilot who purposely crashed a passenger plane into a mountain in the French Alps. José's example prompted the other adults to provide examples of plane crashes and then to move the conversation on to car crashes. Not surprisingly, all of the adult learners and Suzanne had at least one story to share about being involved in an auto crash. José closed out the conversation by telling the group, "When you are in a car crash, you have a 97% chance of surviving. When you're in a plane crash, you have a 0% chance." The group saw the wry humor in José's statement and chuckled a little. With that, the conversation ended, and the group returned to their reading (Field notes, observation 4).

José's ability to connect to real life was also evident the evening that the group watched a video titled *The Story of Stuff* and read through a handout Suzanne downloaded and printed from an accompanying website, www.storyofstuff.org. Suzanne planned the evening's activity in observance of Earth Day. The video and handout provided information about the "materials economy," a term used to describe a system in which people extract, produce, distribute, consume, and dispose of materials. The author, Annie Leonard, paints a grim picture of an unsustainable system and encourages her audience to be more aware and more thoughtful of where products come from, how they are produced, and how they are disposed of. Because Suzanne often operated within a critical framework, she approached that night's lesson with a passion that I had come to expect from her. After viewing the video, she walked the adults through the steps of the materials economy, writing key words on the whiteboard as she talked.

Figure 13: Vocabulary for *The Story of Stuff*



As the image indicates, the list of key words and ideas was quite extensive, and Suzanne spent a great deal of time explaining her understanding of the materials economy and encouraging the adult learners to think critically about an unsustainable system. The adult learners, however, did not become as invested in the lesson as Suzanne hoped. They periodically answered her questions, but, in general, they remained silent as she described the steps and wrote on the board. At one point, however, José decided to join Suzanne in her conversation.

Suzanne: People who distribute goods are not paid well. Who gets paid?

José: The government

S: That's not really what I was looking for. I was looking for "corporations."

J: Corporations

S: The next step is consumption. Who does that?

J: You

S: Us

I was struck by José's answer because it could be interpreted in two ways. First, it could have simply meant that José misunderstood the concept or word and provided the answer he thought Suzanne was looking for. On the other hand, it could also mean that this was José's way of saying that this discussion and this problem belonged to Suzanne—she was the one who wanted to discuss it; she was the one who understood it best; she was the consumer. (He gave the answer "you" in a slightly agitated and raised tone of voice.) Knowing José's desire to be right, to get to the truth, and to make connections between what was occurring in the classroom and the world outside, I am inclined to go with the second option. José's answer was his way of saying, "This problem belongs to you."

José's connections to the real world sometimes infused a bit of humor and irony into the evening's activities and at other times gave him a chance to show the other adults that he knew more about the topic than what they had just read or discussed. In each instance, he introduced an element of truth, a correctness that José asked of himself and others. This desire for correctness also carried over into his practices as a writer.

José's practices as a writer.

Of the three focal participants, José knew the routines best and knew what to expect as Suzanne transitioned out of a reading activity and into a writing activity. He knew that he would write briefly in response to a prompt and then read through, underlining any words or grammatical points he may want to ask Suzanne about. As

stated earlier, he stored his work from previous evenings in a folder that he carried to and from the class. There were a few instances in which José tucked a writing assignment into his folder and later was unable to find it. There were also a few instances in which he did not want to write and found ways to avoid the assignment altogether. For these reasons, I ended the study with only a few samples of José's writing, and I felt that it was quite an accomplishment to have those few.

Because José worked with Suzanne throughout the whole study, I did not have an opportunity to see him write for any other purpose other than to complete activities assigned by Suzanne. He wrote sentences as he completed vocabulary, grammar, and spelling activities; short answers as he completed reading comprehension activities; and one to two paragraphs in response to prompts assigned by Suzanne. As he completed the shorter assignments, he would proofread his work and then hand it off to Suzanne, who would read through, circle errors, and then return to José for corrections. As José completed the lengthier assignments, Suzanne went through her usual steps—proofreading for grammar and spelling—but she also commented about the length of the writing. On a few occasions, she complimented José on his ability to "fill up the whole page," a goal she set for the ESL group that was rarely met.

José and I first talked about writing after I had completed several observations. I felt that I had a good sense of his confidence and comfort in the classroom, and I also noticed that he often talked about himself as writer and about his practices as a writer. In all likelihood, José did this to position himself as an ideal focal participant, and it worked. Fortunately for me, José's role as a focal participant motivated him to think more about

his writing and to reflect on his experiences as a writer. During his first interview, José explained,

> Yeah, I like to write, but sometimes, right now, it's like pretty hard. But when you're in school, you get the hang of it. You read stories, and they ask you to write something about it. And it's pretty easy to do that. But right now, when I'm starting in here, it's pretty difficult (Interview 1).

José's reactions to writing assignments differed each evening. On some nights, he jumped into the assignment without hesitation. On others, he showed resistance by commenting on the relevance of the assignment or by asking Suzanne how much he *had* to write. On one evening, he left the room to avoid the writing assignment altogether. When José did write, he wrote with a great deal of energy and focus. He erased and rewrote often, and as was usual for José, he wrote quickly to ensure that he would be the first one finished. Each time José and the other adult learners were asked to write, the assignment began with large questions intended to understand the prompt and to establish the parameters of the assignment—purpose, length, getting started—and ended with questions and conversations focused on the smaller details. For José, the smaller details typically came down to questions about punctuation, spelling, and subject/verb agreement. The in-between space, the space between the large and small questions and the space in which the adult learners wrote, was silent. As a researcher, this process, this movement from large to small and from questions and negotiations to silence is intriguing, and it creates a powerful context in which to consider José and the other focal participants as writers. Their written products are the result of lively conversations and

activities leading up to and following writing and of silent periods in which they wrote, read, erased, looked around, thought about, and rewrote. José especially followed this pattern, and his process of moving from big questions to small details further underscored what I had come to understand about him as a learner in general. In other words, what I learned about José as a learner carried over into what I learned about him as a writer. As a learner, José valued correctness, rules, truth, and relevance. As a writer, José valued correctness, rules, truth, and relevance.

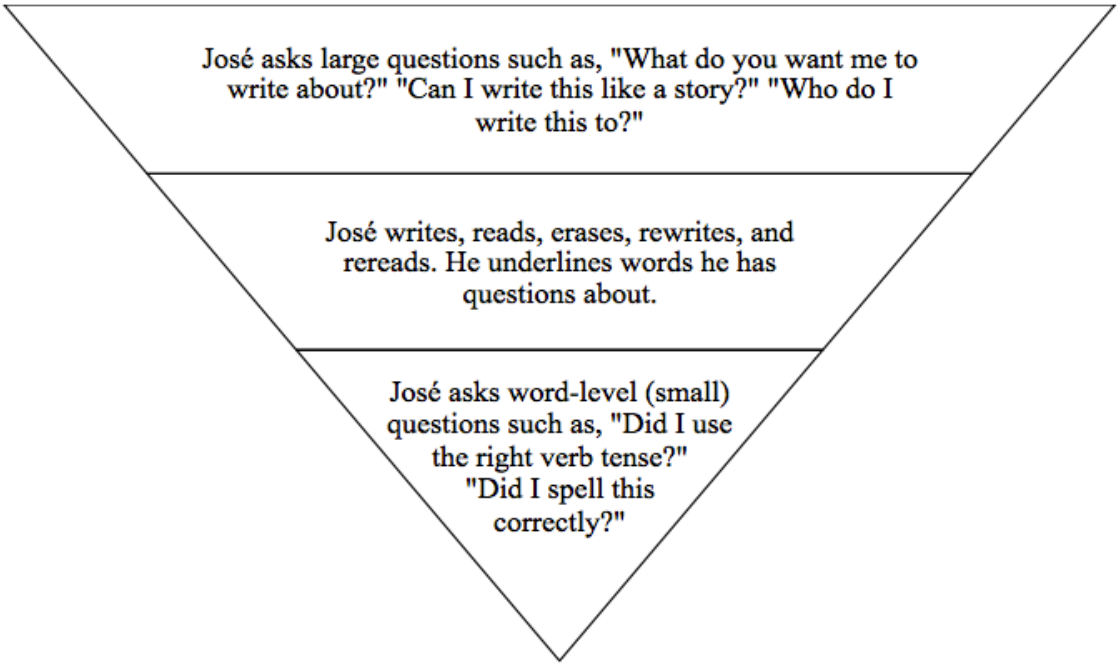
The sections that follow provide details about José's practices as a writer and include images of some of José's written products. Because José wrote in pencil, any errors he made were erased and corrected, so his final copies were always free of the strikethroughs, arrows, overwrites, etc. that most teachers have come to expect in informal written products.

Following the rules of writing.

As you'll recall from chapter four, the entire classroom—instructors and adult learners—spent much of their time thinking and talking about the rules of writing. José especially spent a great deal of his writing energy following those rules, and, consequently, on working directly with Suzanne to find and correct word-level errors. With this in mind, it is no surprise that his work with Suzanne rarely moved beyond conversations about the isolated components of writing—the correct use and spelling of words, the correct use of punctuation marks, the correct use of verb tense, etc. Likewise, conversations about writing between José and I rarely moved beyond talking about his ability to follow the rules and his desire to perfect his use of the English language. During

both of our interviews, I hoped to talk about writing in a larger context, but José continued to loop back to this idea of the individual components of writing (i.e., the words) and, more important, to his belief that he will continue to struggle with writing and with learning in general until he has a stronger grasp of the English language. This focus on following the rules was especially evident when José wrote in response to prompts assigned by Suzanne. I noted a pattern that José followed as he wrote, and I came to visualize that pattern as follows:

Figure 14: José's pattern of narrowing to word-level correctness



The funnel-like image is appropriate because it provides a symbolic representation of how I came to see José's practices as a writer—large ideas to small details. Writing began with large ideas—questions about purpose, organization, and audience—and ended with questions about the correctness of words. Granted, writers who are writing for evaluative

purposes (i.e., classroom assignments, assessments for certification and placement) eventually wrestle with the small details as they fine-tune final drafts, but they also typically pull back to look at the larger picture and to consider the writing as a whole. For José, however, there was no pulling back and looking at the larger picture. For José, following the rules of writing seemed to be the purpose and the final measurement of a written product. It also seemed to be how José defined writing and, more important, how he measured his ability as a writer. As noted earlier, José believes that he has gaps in his learning because he did not fully learn English while in the K–12 system. One of his reasons for attending the adult education program is to fill those gaps, and once those gaps are filled, he will be able to pass the GED® and then move on to community college. It seemed that the first steps in José's journey began with becoming proficient in English, which, in José's world, meant mastering the sometimes elusive and ambiguous rules of the English language. As José explained in our first interview, "(Writing) helps to, like, to me, it helps to know more words, how to spell them, how to put them together. I do like to write." Later in that same interview, he shared,

> (Writing) is pretty hard because I don't know a lot of words, like, to say something. (Writers) use another word, like, a better word or something different that has the same meaning, and that's how they put it together. Like, for me, probably writing in Spanish would be much better because I know all the words, you know? With a better level.

José placed great value in the correct use of words, and Suzanne reinforced this practice by ending each writing activity with an exercise in copyediting, and, on most

evenings, with a question about which "grammatical point" they should cover next. This question was usually followed by faint groans from the other adult learners, but José almost always called out an answer. After completing the "Sunspots" reading activities, Suzanne asked the adult learners what they wanted to work on, and José said, "Commas, quotation marks, exclamation points, my spelling. It's been a long time since I write something. A long time, a very long time" (Field notes, observation 2). After reading "Can Some People See into the Future?", José once again told Suzanne that he wanted to work on quotation marks (Field notes, observation 4). Given that there had been no previous discussions about quotation marks and no occasion to work with dialogue or titles, his request seemed a bit random and unexpected, but it is also seemed in line José's previous (and future) requests for continued practice with the rules.

I watched José wrestle with the rules of writing throughout the whole study. I also talked extensively with him about those rules. As one who philosophically disagrees with focusing on "the rules," I had hoped to avoid conversations about them as we talked about his accomplishments, his goals, and his connections with writing. José, however, would talk of nothing else—a stark reminder that writing is perceived and talked about in so many different ways. Following José's lead, he and I talked about his work with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. He talked about writing during his K–12 years and his current work in the adult education classroom. He fondly remembered a "strict" elementary teacher in North Carolina who "would explain how to do (grammar). She would give you hints about how to do it right, and I mean it was pretty good." He also felt that he was "starting to get better" with his writing by working with Suzanne. As José

explained, “That’s what I told Suzanne. That I wanted to work on (grammar) because, I mean, that’s something that I don’t really know much about” (Interview 1).

Writing the truth.

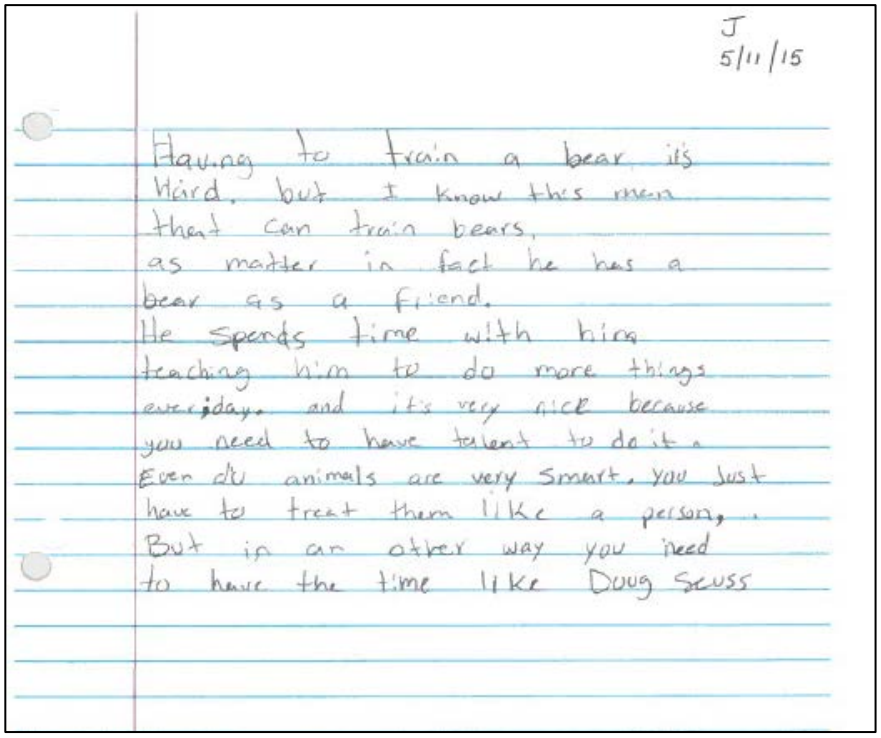
José’s focus on rules and correctness created a comfortable, predictable space in which, on most evenings, he felt he was making progress towards his goals. He relied heavily on what he remembered learning as a K–12 student and what he was learning as he worked with Suzanne. He was an incredibly content and agreeable student who seemed to thrive on receiving compliments from Suzanne, being the one who finished first, and being the one who was right. I had assumed that this would be José’s demeanor throughout the whole study, but there were a few occasions when I saw another side of José, a resistant side that was willing to push back. This resistance seemed to crop up when José was asked to move outside the boundaries of the correctness and truth he valued—the grammar practices, the short answers tied to scientific or historical reading passages—and to write in response to what José perceived to be imaginative and sometimes whimsical reading assignments. As a man in his mid-thirties who successfully managed responsibilities at home and at work, he was keenly aware of his status as an adult, and he wanted to be treated as one. He wanted his time in the adult education classroom to be well spent, and he wanted to focus solely on the steps needed to complete his studies and move on to the community college. With this said, José had little tolerance for activities that seemed to be frivolous and unnecessary. These instances rarely occurred, but when they did, José was noticeably outspoken and resistant.

Following the classroom division into the ESL and GED® groups, Suzanne began to introduce new reading materials to the ESL group that focused on specific reading skills. One of the new materials presented short reading passages (2–3 sentences long), with each passage followed by a multiple-choice question. Depending on the exercise, the question asked the reader to reach a conclusion, draw an inference, state the main idea, etc. On one evening after reading five passages and answering five questions that focused on drawing conclusions, Suzanne asked the ESL group to look through the five passages and "write a story, or write about the rain" (Field notes, observation 17). There was a brief pause in the conversation as the adult learners returned to the passages to make their selections. During that pause, José responded with, "I only write the truth. I don't write stories." This comment was somewhat surprising given José's agreeable nature, but Suzanne was unfazed. She began to read through the passages and landed on passage four, a passage about two brothers who argue while traveling west in the 1800s. Suzanne saw this passage as something José (who has many brothers) could relate to, so she made another attempt at getting José to write. "Surely you've been in a fight. You can write about that." José did not respond to Suzanne's suggestion, but he did return to the reading passages and eventually began to write. One would expect that he had taken Suzanne's advice, but I learned at the end of class that José wrote a response to reading passage 5:

> 5. Doug Seuss trains bears to wreck cabins and chase pioneers in the movies. But the animal trainer believes that the beasts are affectionate and smart. He romps in the creek with his thirteen-hundred-pound friend, Bart. Bart rides in the back of Doug's pickup truck to the car wash. That's where Bart takes a bath.

José's response (which is not a story, but rather a commentary about Doug Seuss) follows.

Figure 15: José's writing sample: Doug Seuss



José and I talked about this writing during the final interview. When I pulled the sample out, José and I talked briefly about his work with Suzanne. José felt that he was "getting used to" working with Suzanne, but he also felt that Suzanne needed to understand that there are times that he is "very stressed" when he comes to class. As we talked, I began to think that the resistance I saw earlier was José's way of saying that it is difficult to leave a job that involves a great deal of thinking and problem solving and drive directly to a classroom setting that does not continue to challenge him. With this new understanding, it felt a bit shallow to talk about his writing about a bear trainer, but the sample was

already out and sitting between us. We looked down at it and began to read. As we looked at his writing, José chuckled a bit. I asked him if there was anything he particularly liked or if there was anything he would change. I was hoping for an answer specific to the writing sample, but José instead provided a larger answer: "Well, what I enjoy writing about is something that I like" (Interview 2). Remembering his resistance to this particular assignment, I hoped to hear his thoughts about the final product, so I once again asked if there was anything he especially liked or wanted to change in his writing about Doug Seuss. José responded with, "Like, nothing comes to mind, you know? Like, I don't like the subject it's about, so . . ." Our conversation about that writing sample stopped there. It seemed that José was not invested in the writing at any point, so I let it go and, later, regretted referring to it at all.

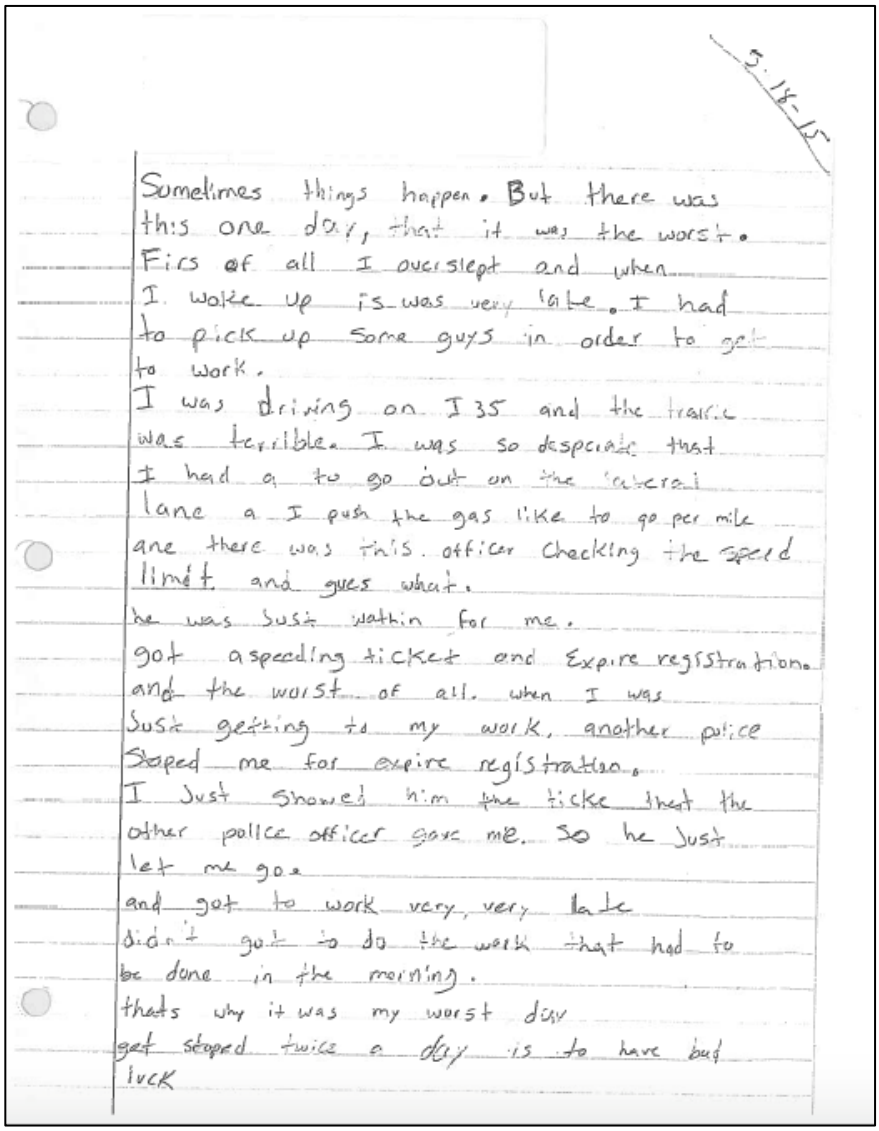
Another of José's writing samples was the result of the group working from the same reading materials described earlier. Suzanne had copied and stapled together several pages of the short reading passages and multiple choice questions, so she had the group return to the same exercises several evenings in a row. (The Doug Seuss writing sample came from the unit 1 questions; the following evening, the group worked on units 2 and 3, and so on.) After completing the questions for units 2 and 3, Suzanne asked the adult learners to select a reading passage to serve as a writing prompt. When no one responded, she assigned a writing activity based on the following passage from unit 3:

> One day two disc jockeys were talking about how fast a driver can go before getting a ticket. The next day one of the disc jockeys said there was no police officer giving tickets on a particular street. The other DJ wanted to know how the

> first one knew this. The first one said, “Believe me. They give tickets if you go 62 miles per hour.”

Suzanne first checked with the group to make sure that everyone had experienced an encounter with a police officer (e.g., getting a traffic ticket, riding with someone who got a traffic ticket), and when everyone confirmed that they had, she told everyone to “write about an encounter you’ve had with a police officer” (Field notes, observation 18). Contrary to his reaction from the previous evening (“I don’t write stories”), José responded to this writing assignment with enthusiasm and quickly began to write. When he was through, he shared his work with Suzanne, who was quite pleased with his “filling up the page,” and, when everyone was through, he read it aloud to the group. His final product follows.

Figure 16: José's writing sample: An encounter with a police officer



5-18-15

Sometimes things happen. But there was
this one day, that it was the worst.
Fircs of all I overslept and when
I wake up is was very late. I had
to pick up some guys in order to get
to work.
I was driving on I 35 and the traffic
was terrible. I was so desperate that
I had a to go out on the ~~side~~ several
lane a I push the gas like to go per mile
ane there was this officer checking the speed
limit and guess what.
he was just waiting for me.
got a speeding ticket and Expire registration.
and the worst of all. when I was
just getting to my work, another police
Stoped me for expire registration.
I just showed him the ticke that the
other police officer gave me. So he just
let me go.
and got to work very, very late
didn't got to do the work that had to
be done in the morning.
thats why it was my worst day
get stoped twice a day is to have bad
luck

José and I looked at this writing sample, too, during the final interview. I pulled this sample out quickly after our discussion about the Doug Seuss writing, and, to my relief, José was much happier to see and talk about his story of the double encounter with police officers. As we talked, José shared that it was a good sample because "there are several parts you can put into that, and (it was) something really interesting." He also

went on to say that, given the chance, he would be willing to return to the writing and make it better. According to José, “Sometimes when you write something, and you’re done with it, then you think more, more things you can put into it” (Interview 2).

Our brief look at both writing samples indicated that José was willing to talk about and return to a piece that told a true story of him. It also indicated that he was not willing to revisit a piece that required him to write about a bear trainer, something that held no relevance or truth for José. As we continued to talk, I learned that José was willing to talk about his writing preferences with me, but he was not willing to have a similar conversation with Suzanne.

> KB: So, if you were going to talk to Suzanne about writing, if you were going to say, “When you ask me to write, or when you ask me to write after we read something, here are some things you need to know about me.” What would you say?
>
> José: Well, actually, I wouldn’t tell her nothing. I mean, I don’t like to make her feel bad or something like that. Because, if someone tells me, “You know what? I don’t like this part, or I don’t want to talk about this, or I don’t want to write about this,” then, that’s, I won’t feel comfortable, so I just try to write something. But if it’s not something that I like, you know.

Knowing José’s care in thinking about how he treats others (recall that he felt that there was a *correct* way in which he and others should behave), I was not surprised by his response, but I regretted that José saw my question as an invitation to critique Suzanne’s work. Rather, I was hoping that the question would give him a chance to verbalize his

preferences as a writer. José, however, imagined a different conversation between him and Suzanne. Given José's strong reactions to the two pieces of writing, one could imagine that José would tell Suzanne that he prefers to write about topics that are relevant and truthful. Given his noticeable satisfaction with the second writing sample—the story of his encounters with the police officers—it also seems fair to think that José would also say that he prefers to make connections between his own life and the writing he is asked to complete.

José's writing samples and his talk about those samples provide good evidence of his desire to follow the rules, to produce relevant and truthful writing, and to resist when he felt that the writing was not aligned to his goals. There is also evidence in a writing sample that does *not* exist because José made the conscious decision not to write. As you will recall, Suzanne planned a special Earth Day lesson in which she and the adult learners viewed a video (*The Story of Stuff*), read through an accompanying handout, and created a diagram to explain the materials economy. As described earlier, the conversation between Suzanne and the adult learners was largely one-sided, with Suzanne talking the majority of the time and the adult learners quietly taking notes and occasionally responding to questions from Suzanne. As Suzanne talked, she created an extensive list of vocabulary words associated with *The Story of Stuff* on the whiteboard, and she told the group to copy the words so they could use them later when they wrote. Suzanne explained, "These are good words to know, to throw into your essays." I noticed that most of the adult learners wrote down the words, but José and another student, Alonzo, did not. As Suzanne wrapped up her explanation of the materials economy, she

made the following writing assignment: “Is the amount of stuff Americans buy harming the world? How? What are some things we can do to fix it?” I found the assignment a bit difficult because it assumed that everyone would have the same answer to the first question: “Yes, the amount of stuff Americans buy does harm the world,” so I watched with great interest as the adult learners began to write. Two adult learners, Flora and Tina, got started rather quickly. Alonzo began shortly after them. José, however, stood up, dialed a number on his phone, and walked out of the room. This decision to leave the room presented an interesting and new side of José. He seemed somewhat resistant throughout the lesson (recall that he told Suzanne that *she* was the consumer), and he found a way to leave the room rather than complete the writing assignment.

José’s practices as a writer were embedded in the writing he readily completed, the writing he reluctantly completed, and the writing he did not begin or complete at all. He saw writing as his opportunity to be right, to get to the truth, and to make connections between what he was learning and his life beyond the adult education classroom. For me, these practices speak deeply to the complexities surrounding José’s work as a writer. These practices also create a rich context in which to consider José’s identity as a writer.

José’s identity as a writer.

For José and the other two focal participants who follow, it is impossible to fully know and describe the identities the adult learners brought to and enacted in the adult education classroom. The classroom served as a gathering place for adults who managed home, family, and jobs throughout the day and, if their schedules and responsibilities allowed, made their way to a classroom at the end of a very long day. On a good day,

they arrived on time, gave their full attention to their work, and enjoyed being with other adults who shared similar goals. On a challenging day, they arrived late, made several phone calls to ensure children were safely at home, and kept to themselves as they divided their attention between life inside and outside the classroom. During my brief time there, there were more challenging days than good, and I marveled at the resilience of the adults who returned each night. With that said, I want to be clear that as I discuss writer identity, I do so from a highly respectful space and recognize that I can only touch briefly upon a very complex topic.

The goal in exploring José's identity as a writer was not to identify discreet moments in which José thought of himself as a writer. Rather, the goal was to begin with an understanding of the larger identities José brought to the classroom—his past, present, and future self—and to consider if those identities were acknowledged, supported, built upon, questioned, or lost as he wrote. To further complicate matters, the identity work did not simply lay within José the writer. There were external factors at work, too. His identity was informed by the discourses José had access to throughout his life—discourses of family, community, employment, education, hobbies, etc.—and by real or imagined readers who would eventually read and respond to his writing—Suzanne, me, other adult learners, the adult education and GED® institutions. With these multiple layers in mind, it was not only necessary to consider the identities José brought to writing but also the identities at work as he wrote and received feedback.

José's past, present, and future self.

José typically shared stories with the ESL group as they worked together to complete reading activities. On the evening the group read "Can Some People See the Future?", for example, José told about a major car crash he survived. On other evenings, he shared stories about his family and their weekend gatherings with aunts, uncles, and cousins. When José and I talked privately, he used stories to talk about the challenges of his current job, his oldest son's accomplishments, and his previous schooling experiences. He shared stories about former teachers, schools he attended while in the K–12 system, and early writing that his mother saved. José's narratives provided rich insights into the identities he enacted while in the adult education classroom. They also told a rich story of who he was (his *past* self), who he is (his *present* self), and who he hopes to be (his *future* self). The table below provides descriptions of José's past, present, and future self as told through his narratives.

Table 13: José's past, present, and future self

Past	Present	Future
• A former resident of North Carolina who moved with his family to Texas as a 5th grader • A student who struggled in the K–12	• A husband and father of five children who is especially proud of the accomplishments of his oldest son	• A community college student • A business major who, after graduation, owns a small business

Table 13: continued.

system because he did not fully learn the English language • A student who exited the K–12 system as a 10th grader and transitioned into the workforce	• One of nine siblings who frequently visits with his parents, brothers, and sisters for recreational activities and celebrations • A construction worker who specializes in roofs • A student in an adult education program who wants to learn the correct use of the English language and who wants to prepare for the GED®	

Discourses available to José.

I relied greatly on José's narratives to get a sense of José the person. As I began to translate this understanding into what I could also know about José the writer, I considered his previous and current access to discourses, what Burgess (2012) refers to as "socially available possibilities for selfhood." It was important to identify these discourses because, given the context, there were some writing assignments in which José wrote with authority (e.g., his interactions with the police officers), but there were many

others in which he yielded his authority to the omnipresent rules of writing. From early interactions with José, I learned that he embodied discourses enacted upon him as a K–12 student; discourses available to him as a member of a large, Spanish-speaking family and of his surrounding community; and discourses learned through employment. While he was in the adult education classroom, he navigated the discourses necessary to participate in the adult education and GED® programs. When I began to think of these discourses as *Discourses* (Gee, 1990), then I began to see a more complete picture of José, and I began to appreciate the multiple and varied *identity kits* available to José the writer. As Gee notes, a Discourse is a sort of identity kit that comes with "a costume and instruction on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize" (p. 142). With that said, it is an understatement to say that examining José's identity as a writer was difficult work. I now greatly appreciate why there is a gap in research around the writer identities of adult learners. It was daunting to consider all of the identities José brought to an act of writing and to determine how or if any of those identities were enacted, acknowledged, and/or acted upon (by José or the instructor) as he wrote.

A single act of writing.

Because each act of writing is an act of identity (Burgess, 2012), I examined one specific event in which José worked one-to-one with Suzanne to write sentences. The sentence-writing activity occurred early in the study on an evening in which José was the only adult learner present. For this reason, Suzanne, José, and I sat closely together, and I was able to see José's paper as he wrote, erased, and rewrote. At the time, I did not

envision a sentence-writing activity as an activity that would greatly inform my research (I was naively there, after all, to see "big," lengthier activities such as paragraph and essay writing, but I wrote the words and sentences in my notes as José wrote.) In hindsight, taking careful notes of José's sentences was a smart move. Given José's habit of losing papers and his occasional reluctance to write, I came to appreciate all samples of José's writing, no matter how small or inconsequential they seemed at the time. The sentences also proved to be a powerful statement of what I later came to understand about José: The sentences represented a time that Suzanne and José both agreed he was *right*.

The activity began with a spelling test. José had missed a class from the previous week, so, because it was just José and Suzanne, they decided it was a good evening for him to catch up. Suzanne asked José to take out a piece of paper and to write a list of words as she called them out. As he wrote, José occasionally interjected stories and comments. For example, after the word "hotel," José told Suzanne and me that he and his family, his brothers and their families, and his mom and dad stayed in hotels as they traveled to North Carolina to see his sister. After the word "spider," he and Suzanne talked about the fear of spiders. After the word "smoke," José added to it by saying "smoke detector" as he wrote. When José finished, Suzanne handed him the list and asked him to check the words. He found and corrected three errors. Suzanne then asked José to complete a matching activity (draw a line from the vocabulary word to the correct definition) and to write sentences using each word. José wrote the sentences rather quickly. He erased and rewrote frequently, and when he was done, he read the sentences

to Suzanne and me. I checked and added to my notes as he read. José's sentences were as follows:

1. I hurt my elbow.
2. Few people know what a globe is.
3. We are working in silence.
4. I like to visit the coast.
5. The ship sailed around the iceberg.
6. Everyone needs to take good care of his spine.
7. There are mice below the floor.
8. I'd love to visit a nice hotel.
9. What is that strange odor?
10. Some people love to experience fright.
11. My son is afraid of spiders.
12. She climbed to the highest point of the roof.
13. It is not good to smoke.
14. She enjoys the Lifetime Channel.
15. It's hard to believe that there are still pirates.

After José read his sentences, Suzanne complimented him, asked if there was anything else he'd like to study, and then began to talk about her own experiences as a writer. She and José closed out their conversation with personal observations about writing.

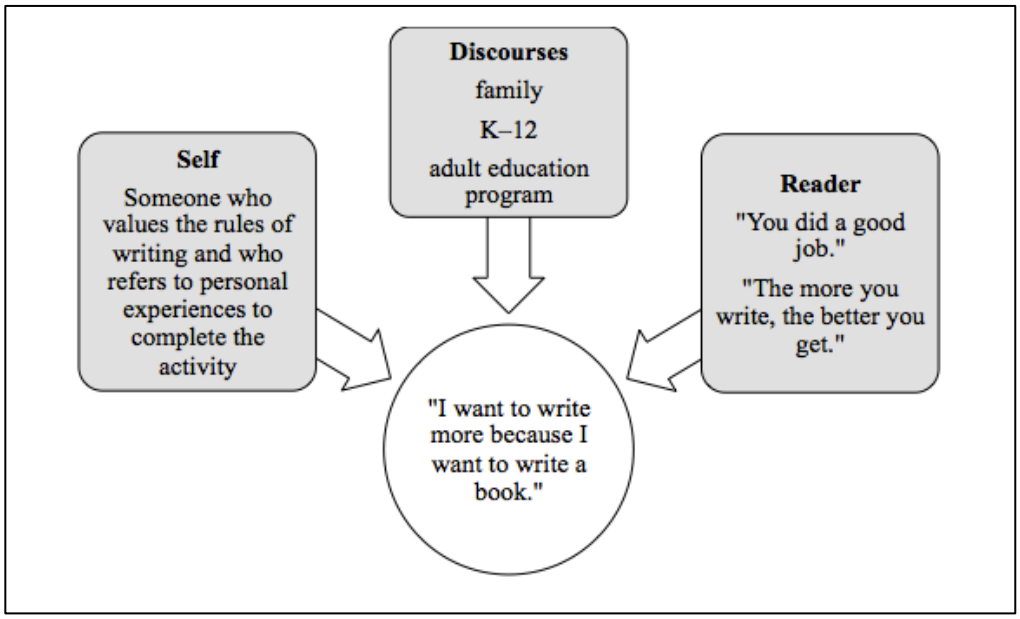
> Suzanne: I write with my students, and I'm OK with sharing my writing and my mistakes. I also like sharing what I've learned about being a writer. It's good to

get everything on paper first and then go back to fix the mistakes. The more you write, the better you get.

José: I need to write more, to practice more. I want to write more because I want to write a book.

With that statement, class was over, and José gathered his supplies and moved on to the math classroom. It was quite clear that José was pleased with himself and that he had ended the evening on a confident note. Looking back, I realize that it was an especially good evening for José because (1) he had Suzanne's full attention and (2) the activity touched upon elements that José valued most when writing. The activity allowed him to focus on words at their individual levels, to focus on the rules of writing, to share stories/personal experiences as he wrote, and to be right. I also realized that there was a tremendous amount of identity work going on within that one act of writing. As I considered the various identities enacted within that writing activity, the discourses José drew upon as he completed the activity, and the identity resulting from Suzanne's responses during and after the activity, I came to see an incredibly complex interaction. Figure 17 provides a visual representation of the identity work occurring within that single act of writing. While viewing the figure, consider the personal sense of *self* José brought to the activity, the *discourses* José drew from as he wrote, and the identity constructed as the *reader* (Suzanne) responded to José the writer. José's statement following the sentence writing activity—"I want to write more because I want to write a book"—speaks a great deal to the writer identity constructed from this single act of writing.

Figure 17: Identity work as José completes a single act of writing



Granted, it was rare for a writing activity to end on such a positive note, especially for someone who spent so much of his time focused on rules and correctness and who, on any other evening, saw himself as someone who needed more practice. For José, a writer is someone who follows the rules, and, by his own definition, he still had quite a bit of work to do before he could consider himself a writer. For that evening, however, José wrote fifteen sentences that were deemed correct by both him and Suzanne. He wrote with authority as he incorporated elements of his past and current self into the writing. At the end of the activity, Suzanne (his reader) acknowledged that he had done a good job and began to share writer's tips with José. In this instance of writing, José experienced personal success, and he saw himself as someone who would one day write a book.

Flora

Flora joined the class on the same evening that I began to think about who would become the focal participants of the study. I had visited the classroom several times previous to that night to observe and learn more about the instructors and the program. During those first visits, I made notes about the classroom in general (i.e., schedule, room arrangement, instructors' routines, adults' attendance patterns) and sat quietly, hoping to seamlessly shift from an outside observer to a trustworthy member of the group. Flora's first night in the classroom was also the first night that I moved from the outer edge, sat in the midst of the group, and introduced myself to the adult learners. Because she interacted so quickly with the others and me and spoke with such clarity and commitment in her purpose for being there, Flora struck me as someone who would return the next night. I had observed that other adults who attempted to join the program typically came in and sat quietly by themselves, rarely taking part in the conversations or sitting with the other adults. I watched their faces, and it seemed that they were not sure if they belonged there or not. (Throughout the study, I observed five other adults enter the program. Four did not return after the first night. Another exited the program after erratic attendance over three weeks.) Flora, however, quickly introduced herself to the other adults and settled in. She openly shared her reason for joining the class and her apprehension about returning to a classroom. As she began to work, it became obvious that she easily shifted between English and Spanish and was eager to explain words or ideas in Spanish when her peers appeared to struggle with conversations or activities.

Because of Flora's comfort in being there, I made a mental note to get to know her better. She seemed to be my best chance at working with a focal participant who would regularly attend class *and* who would welcome opportunities to talk to me. She also seemed to be very driven in reaching the goals she had set for herself, which included attending evening classes until she and the instructors felt she was ready to begin taking the GED® exams. She shared her future plans the night she joined the class, and she reiterated those plans and her reasoning behind them in our first interview a few weeks later. According to Flora,

> I'm trying to get into either working in the school, either a cafeteria worker or a teacher's assistant, something that will let me be there for (Emilio). Right now, obviously I quit my job because it was affecting my time, you know, being there with him, trying to help him out, trying to be there more for him and help him out more and be more at home because all my life has just been about me going and going and working and working and not attending to him and not attending to my husband. And really, honestly, the honest trust is I just didn't care. It's not that I didn't care about him. I do care about him. I love him. But my focus was, "If I don't work, if I don't make this money, then how am I going to take care of him?"

After noticing the ease in which she talked to the other adults and her desire to make sure that everyone understood what was being said (i.e., translating the recent conversation from English to Spanish), I asked Flora about her comfort in talking to others and in sharing her stories. Her response? "I do that all the time. That's just how I

am" (Interview 1). Flora was happy to talk to everyone in the class, including me, and she was happy to share her journey as a student and a writer.

While my decision to ask Flora to be a focal participant was made early in the study, I later realized that it was a very fortuitous one. Because of the timing in her joining the class, Flora had the unique perspective of working with both instructors and with the two different groups. She also had the unique experience of writing in two contexts—the informal, collaborative group work led by Suzanne and the structured, independent work led by Hillary. She was by far my greatest source of data when exploring the writing practices of the adult learners. As I worked my way through that data, I looked first at her practices as a learner in the classroom and then narrowed my focus to her practices and identity as a writer. You will no doubt notice overlaps in what is reported out, but just as with José, Flora's practices as a learner informed her practices as a writer.

Flora's practices as a learner in the adult education classroom.

Flora came to the adult learning classroom ready to get started with the work ahead and to create a space for herself among the other adult learners. She quickly became part of conversations, adding to discussions about that evening's lesson and sharing personal experiences that were relevant to the learning. She regularly brought supplies such as pens, pencils, and paper and shared them with the other adult learners. She switched between English and Spanish as she talked to the instructors and the other adult learners. She listened carefully throughout each lesson. She made notes as she read and as Suzanne pointed out big ideas. She seemed to have a good grasp of the work going

on and could easily transition from one activity to another. She attended regularly, only missing class when her work schedule was rearranged or when the weather turned bad. (We experienced an unusually rainy period and several local floods during the study, and she did not like to drive in the rain.)

When I asked Flora about where she felt most comfortable when working in the adult education program, she told me that she is most comfortable in the math classroom. Her previous schooling experiences led her to conclude that she struggled most in reading and writing (Field notes, observation 1). This uncomfortable relationship with reading and writing may explain why Flora spent so much energy on completing her work and why, on some evenings, she grew noticeably frustrated and quiet.

Being a mother.

First and foremost, Flora came to the adult education classroom as the mother of her seven-year-old son, Emilio. On the evening Flora joined the class, Suzanne asked her to complete a timed reading and explained that she needed to record a reading rate. Suzanne referred to the reading rate measurement as the "yucky part," but explained that it was necessary so the instructors could chart her progress for program reporting purposes. (Flora's reading rate was recorded at grade 5, month 8.) Flora assured Suzanne that it was okay to measure her reading rate, but she also let Suzanne know that math and science were her "strong spots." According to Flora, other subjects created problems for her because of her dyslexia. She also explained that she has always stumbled with simple words but could usually "figure out the big words," which surprised her previous teachers. From there, Flora moved away from talking about her own learning difficulties

and focused on Emilio, a second grader at a local elementary school, and his own learning difficulties. She finished her brief introduction to the group by saying, "I want to get my GED® so I can help my son." From that introductory statement and on, Flora's conversations and her classroom work typically came back to her concerns for Emilio's wellbeing— his education, his health, his motivation, his attentiveness, and his supervision or care when she could not be with him.

When looking across the data about Flora—observations as she worked and talked with the group, informal conversations as she completed classroom activities, writing samples, our formal interview—I found a pattern of Flora's conversations and writing typically beginning with larger, general topics but ultimately leading to or ending with references to Emilio. Flora's references to Emilio ranged from sharing a story about his birth, to identifying ways in which she takes care of him, to voicing concerns about his learning. When Flora made these references, she sometimes made connections between her own life and his. For example, when telling the group she has dyslexia, she noted that Emilio has dyslexia, too. (Through later conversations with Flora, I learned that neither Flora nor her son had been formally diagnosed as dyslexic.) And while Flora would sometimes talk solely about her own learning difficulties, she typically made connections between her struggles and Emilio's.

In early, informal conversations, Flora talked about Emilio's schooling experiences thus far and about her concerns for how or if he would be successful in future grades. Flora described how, at the end of each school year, she was told by a teacher or counselor that Emilio would either need to repeat the previous year or attend summer

school in order to be placed at the next grade level. She also talked about how she felt as she made those difficult decisions. While one part of her was worried that Emilio might not be fully learning what he should at each grade level, there was another part that remained hopeful and optimistic, that this summer could be the turning point for him. On the two occasions that she was asked about Emilio attending summer school—the summers following his kindergarten and first grade years—Flora decided that he would attend, and after each round of summer school, she questioned whether it had benefitted him.

Flora talks about her and Emilio's experiences in school.

This struggle between repetitions of grades versus summer school cropped up yet again in my first interview with Flora. She described an experience in her own schooling in which she believes her mother was asked to make a similar decision. In Flora's case, however, her mother opted for Flora to repeat first grade.

> Well, as far as I remember, I remember having to take first grade again because I wasn't at the level I needed to be. And my mom said, "Well, you have to take first grade again because the teacher said, you know, you need to." But in reality, I guess we had a choice whether I could go to summer school to try to get to that level, but back then it was just in the environment that we lived. It was just hard for her to get around and take us anywhere because it was just my dad driving. My dad was the type of Hispanic that was, you know, back in his time, the men worked; the women stayed at home. You know, if you make it, you make it. If you don't, you don't. And that's it.

Our formal interview began by talking about Flora's struggles as a K–12 student and how she came to be part of the adult education class. Throughout the conversation, Flora and I talked a great deal about her own experiences, but there were several instances in which Flora began with a memory about herself and ended with a connection to Emilio. For example, as we talked about her early schooling experiences, Flora described a positive memory of working in a computer-based accelerated program. She felt that her success stemmed from the teacher's ability to devote more attention to Flora's needs and to adjust instruction when she felt lost or confused. Flora hoped to provide the same experience for Emilio.

> It was a lot easier for me because I think I went through that (the accelerated program) faster than going through the whole year of school and what I was learning there. And then of course the teachers that I had in that accelerated program, they were, I felt they were more, not so much laid back but more helpful. You know, it was like if I was stuck on something, they would come and go like, "Okay, let me help you out." You know, "This is what is going on, and this is what you have to learn, and this is what you have to know." And when I was in class, it was more hard for the teacher because she had to worry about 20 plus kids and not be focused on one. So, and that's why, that's the reason why I'm trying to focus on my son.

At another point in that same conversation, Flora stated that Emilio struggles with writing. As Flora began to describe Emilio's experiences with writing, she referenced a

writing activity she had saved from his kindergarten days and then went on to talk about his difficulties in reading.

> I have (writing) that I think he did in kinder, and it's just like a little—It's not little. It's big. It's kind of like a poster thing. It has a picture of him, and it's asking, "Okay, what's your favorite thing to do?" "What's your favorite color?" Like, different questions he's got to write in there. He lacks in that as well. He's like me. He's like—Okay, if I read to him, he gets it. But if I sit him there, and I have him read it, and I ask him, "Okay, so what did you read about?" he doesn't know what to tell me back. He's like, "Oh, I don't know."

It is important to note that Flora's comment, "He's like me," lies between the statements about writing and reading. When I asked Flora later (as a follow-up) where "He's like me" should fall—Is Emilio like you as a writer or as a reader? Flora replied, "Both."

Flora keeps Emilio and herself on task.

Prior to our interview, Flora had expressed concerns about Emilio's ability to stay focused on his work. (Later, you will see her reference Emilio's ADHD in a writing sample, "One Long Summer Break vs. Several Shorter Breaks.") This desire for Emilio to stay focused and, as Flora often stated, "on task" was evident on the evening we met to conduct our first formal interview. There were some scheduling problems between work and school that day, so Flora brought Emilio with her. He sat near us as he waited for his father to pick him up. Flora brought pens, crayons, and paper with her and gave Emilio tasks to do as we talked. During our conversation, Flora checked in on Emilio frequently, giving him instructions and asking questions as he worked. Emilio's father arrived before

he finished his work, and as he packed up his pencils and paper, Flora told him to take his work home and finish it there. She also told him that she would check to make sure that he had finished his work when she got home. As Emilio left, Flora called out to him, "Could you finish your drawing for me? You take it home and finish it at home. Finish it. Bye, babe. Finish it when you get home. I want to see it, okay?"

Flora placed great value in Emilio finishing his work. On most class evenings, she told the group that one of the jobs she would have to do later that night was to make sure that Emilio had finished his schoolwork and was ready for the next day. I saw this same desire to finish work in Flora as she completed assignments in the adult education classroom. When working with either Suzanne or Hillary, Flora made it a goal to finish her work before the end of class. On evenings that she completed writing activities with Hillary, she often worked through the break to complete all of the steps. For example, on the evening she completed the *Minimum Wage* assignment, Hillary reminded Flora of the steps she had completed and gave her one last task: write a final draft. Flora began work on a final draft, incorporating Hillary's edits and additions as she wrote. When she was through, she put her papers together in the order in which she had worked on them—prompt, planning, draft, and final copy—and told us that she wanted to staple the papers together but did not have a stapler (Field notes, observation 19).

Emilio figured largely into Flora's practices as a learner in the adult education classroom. He was a primary consideration in Flora's decision to attend the adult education program, and he was her chief concern as she navigated school and work schedules in order to be there each evening. She spoke often of the logistics involved in

getting Emilio picked up from school, started on his homework, and handed off to his father before she came to class. On the few occasions Flora missed class, it was typically because her or her husband's work schedule had been rearranged, and they were unable to meet and hand off Emilio as planned. Emilio also served as an example and a reminder of the challenges Flora (and now Emilio) experienced as a student. He was a central figure in Flora's conversations and her work, and, consequently, he greatly shaped her practices as a learner within the adult education classroom. You will see later that he also shaped her practices as a writer.

Being part of a group.

When asked about her learning preferences, Flora told both instructors and me that she preferred to work as part of a group, and she explained that when she works by herself, she gets nervous and frustrated. Throughout her first three weeks in the program, Flora worked with Suzanne and was a member of a group comprised of approximately five other adults. She sat with the other adults and took part in the reading activities. She read silently, and she read aloud when it was her turn. She assisted in translating words from the reading into Spanish when the other adults asked for clarification. She typically finished answering the reading questions early or within the time limit and then moved on to assist the other adults around her. Flora was quite content to work in this setting.

Because Flora was so adamant about working with a group, I was puzzled by the decision to move her into a context in which she was expected to work on her own. The move came when Hillary joined the class as a permanent instructor who would focus solely on GED® writing, and Flora was selected to move to Hillary's end of the table. For

the next few classes, Flora sat with Hillary and completed several practice essays. She read the passages silently, made notes to herself as she read, and worked with Hillary to complete practice essays from pre-writing to final drafts. Flora still had opportunities to talk with other adults, but those opportunities were limited to small, private conversations and to topics specific to the evening's assignment. (Because of the erratic attendance, adults at the GED® end of the table rarely worked on the same assignment or talked to each other about their work.) In spite of earlier conversations and requests to be part of a group, Flora spent much of her time in the classroom working alone.

This shift from group to individual work marked a turning point for Flora. Her attendance became erratic, and shortly after moving to the GED® end of the table, Flora left. While I will never know for sure, I am inclined to think that Flora lost her sense of belonging and community and, more important, the support of other adults who shared similar goals. Her exit could also be the result of other factors such as Emilio's busy end-of-school schedule or a new instructional focus that proved to be challenging and frustrating for Flora. This frustration is explained more fully as we look at Flora's practices as a writer.

Flora's practices as a writer.

Flora provided the most opportunities for me to observe a writer at work, to collect writing samples, and to talk with as she completed writing activities. I owe this accessibility to her good nature and the ease in which she interacted with everyone in the classroom, including me. As noted earlier, Flora was comfortable and outgoing with both the instructors and the other adult learners, and she quickly shared her essays—both the

process and the finished products—with me. While it is certainly true that Flora completed other writing activities (e.g., answers to open-ended reading comprehension questions, grammar practice worksheets, sentence writing exercises), she did not offer to share those, and I did not ask nor did I feel that I had missed an opportunity to collect additional data. It was my goal to collect the most authentic samples possible and to create minimal disruption in the classroom routine.

Flora came to the program with some apprehension about reading and writing. This apprehension was evident as she focused on the correctness of her answers—both in the answer itself and in its written form—and on the absorption of grammar and spelling rules covered by Suzanne and Hillary. For example, Suzanne regularly asked the adults to proofread their work before turning in their writing assignments. After she received their papers, Suzanne read through, circled errors, and returned to each adult learner so he or she could make corrections. When reading Flora's writing, Suzanne typically pointed out errors in grammar and in spelling, and as Flora made her corrections, she also made notes in the margins to help remember the rules for future writing assignments. Examples of errors noted by Suzanne and of the notes Flora wrote to herself are detailed in the section titled "Writing notes to herself."

While most of the adult learners approached writing assignments with hesitation and uncertainty (e.g., "How long does this have to be?" "What do I write about?"), Flora typically began a writing activity with few, if any, questions. If she did ask a question, it was, "How do I get started?" Once the writing began, she was very quiet and focused. When she stopped writing, it was to look around to take a measure of the room, to read

through what she had written thus far, or to re-read the prompt or sections of the sample essays tied to the prompt. Most of the writing samples collected from Flora came from her work while at the GED® end of the table. She, too, worked within a context similar to the one described for José. (Recall the inverted pyramid: ▽.) Assignments typically began with large questions, moved into a silent period in which she wrote, and ended with questions and/or observations about small details. The difference, however, is that Hillary was typically the one to narrow to the details and to question Flora about decisions made as she wrote.

When thinking about Flora as a writer, I came to understand that she saw a larger, more complete picture of writing. She was willing to think about writing in its entirety rather than become lost in the small details (i.e., the word-level errors). This larger view gave Flora the freedom to use writing as a tool for learning and as a means for sharing her concerns for and dedication to her son Emilio.

Writing notes to herself.

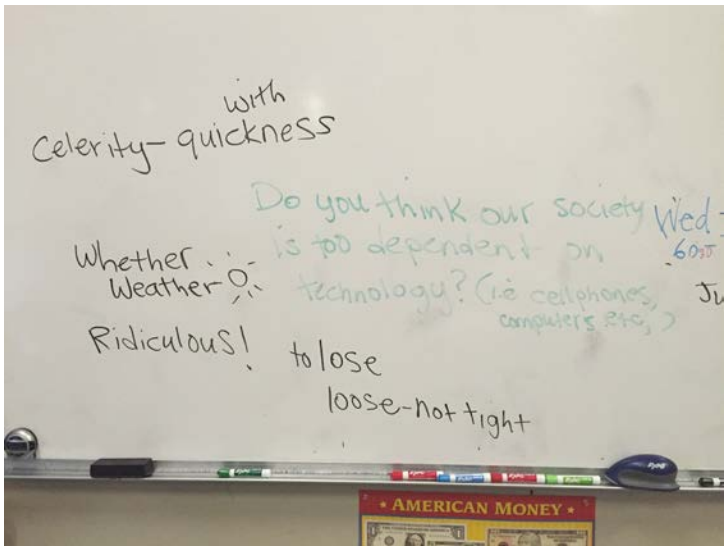
Shortly after meeting Flora, I noticed that she often made notes to herself as she completed reading comprehension questions and writing assignments. She copied down what Suzanne and Hillary said as they provided feedback on assignments, especially when they gave rules and reminders about grammar and spelling. According to Flora, "I want to understand everything I am doing" (Field notes, observation 3). She also explained that she made notes to herself when she was younger, but that some teachers would "write on the board and erase before I could copy the words down" (Field notes, observation 5). When I asked Suzanne if she noticed Flora's practice of writing notes to

herself, she quickly said “yes” and then noted that Flora did this in both the language arts and math classrooms. Flora’s practice of writing notes to herself and, consequently, of creating lists and reminders so she could “understand everything (she was) doing” was particularly noticeable in the math classroom. Rather than use a calculator, which was the recommended approach in the adult education classroom and the established process when taking the GED® exam, Flora opted to complete all of the practice math problems without a calculator. Suzanne added, “(The math instructor) suggested to Flora that she should use a calculator, but Flora wants to write everything down” (Field notes, observation 3). (The math instructor was both baffled and dismayed by Flora’s refusal to use a calculator.) Suzanne quickly picked up on Flora’s habit of writing notes and learned to pause as she talked to Flora, giving her time to select a new color of ink, to write in the margins of her paper, and to confirm that what she had written was correct. This pattern of writing notes was most prevalent as Flora completed reading comprehension and grammar exercises (handed out to students as worksheets), but she also made notes to herself as she wrote. Following are examples of notes Flora made as she completed writing assignments.

The first example comes from an early writing assignment in which Suzanne asked Flora to respond to the following prompt: “Do you think our society is too dependent on technology (i.e., cellphones, computers, etc.)?” That evening, Flora was the only adult learner present at the beginning of class. (Alonzo arrived at the end of the writing assignment.) By looking at the conversation and activities that unfolded during and after this writing assignment, it became clear that Suzanne introduced the prompt to

begin the process of transitioning Flora away from the open-ended writing activities she had grown accustomed to and moving to a more formal approach to writing in which Flora was expected to go through specific tasks (e.g., prewriting, drafting, editing) and produce a multi-paragraph response. As Suzanne and Flora talked through Flora's questions about spelling, Suzanne made notes on the whiteboard and added her own spelling tips as they talked. The image below is of the whiteboard at the end of the writing activity. The writing prompt was written in the middle of the board in green. As Flora asked about specific words, Suzanne wrote the words and, in the case of "weather," drew a sun beside it to differentiate between "whether" and "weather."

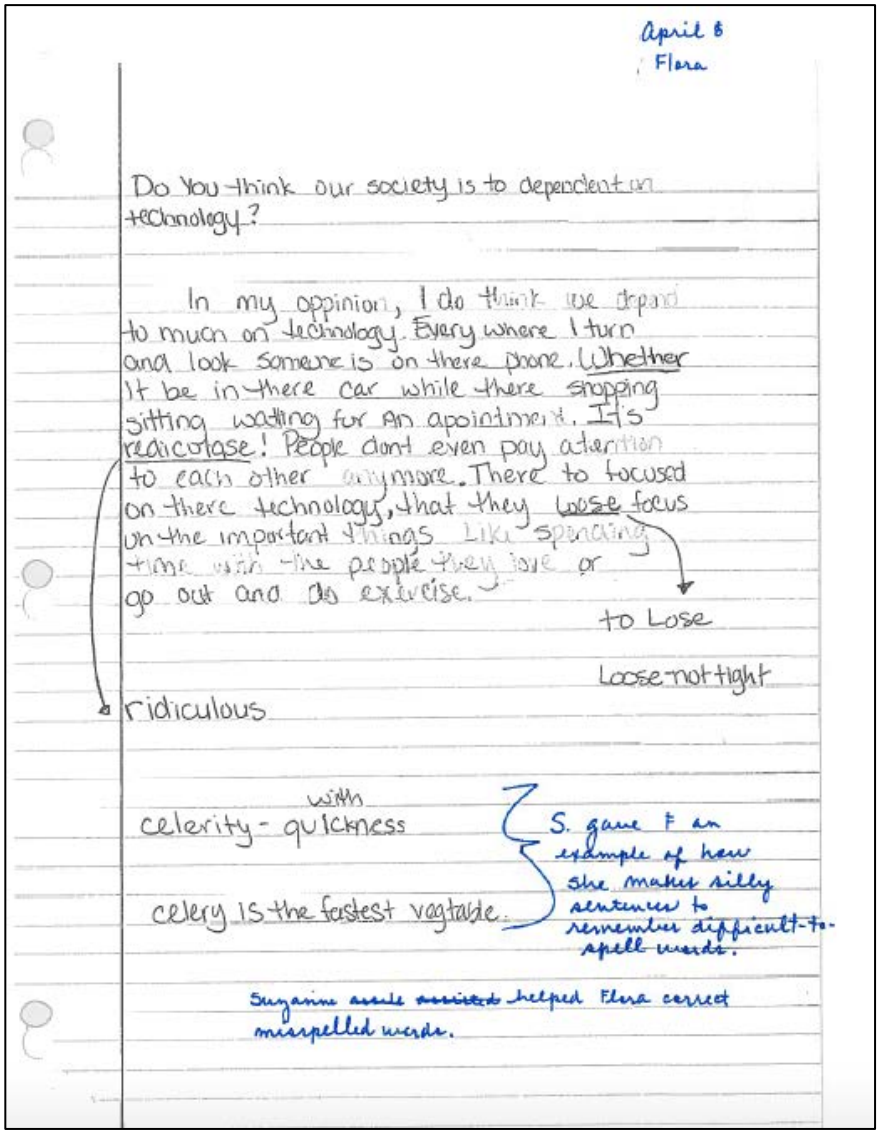
Figure 18: Suzanne's notes for "Our Dependence on Technology"



As Suzanne wrote on the whiteboard, Flora wrote on her paper. She underlined the problematic words as she asked Suzanne about spelling, and, with the exception of "whether" and "weather," she copied Suzanne's notes. While "celerity" was not part of

Flora's writing (nor was it a word she asked about), Flora also copied the definition for "celerity" and the accompanying sentence. Flora's finished product follows.

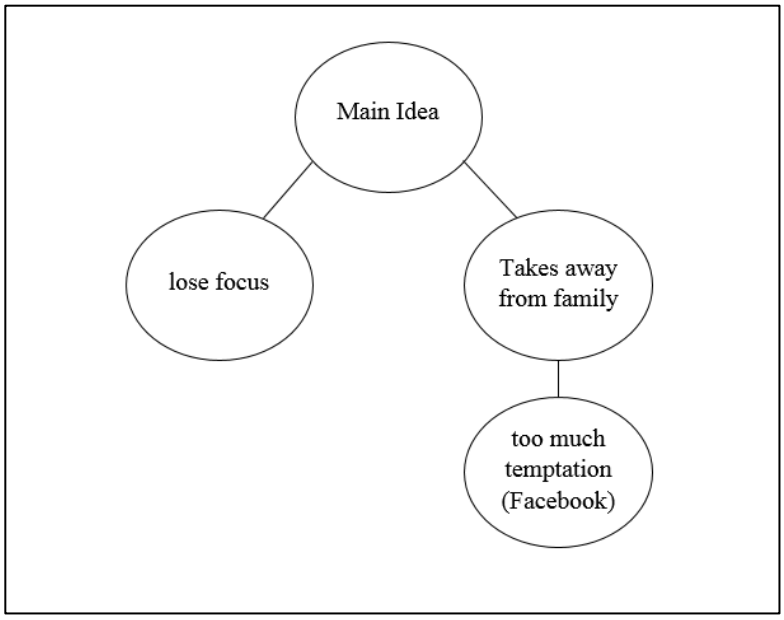
Figure 19: Flora's writing sample: "Our Dependence on Technology"



Shortly after completing the writing activity, Suzanne asked Flora to look back over her work and explained that the writing they had just completed was an "informal

essay." They were now going to use the same prompt to move on to a "formal essay" process in which they would start with prewriting, or planning. They would complete the prewriting step with the help of a "bubble chart" (Field notes, observation 6). Flora and Suzanne talked as Suzanne drew bubbles, and Flora offered ideas for two paragraphs to be included in the next writing assignment. When Flora ran out of ideas, Suzanne pointed out that Flora had the beginning of a three-paragraph essay, and that while some people say the GED® requires five paragraphs, three paragraphs work, too. A replica of Suzanne and Flora's completed mind map follows.

Figure 20: Flora's mind map: "Our Dependence on Technology"



After completing the mind map, Suzanne instructed Flora to begin writing, but within a few minutes, class was over. Flora did not start the essay, and it was not picked back up in future classes. That night's shift from Flora's original paragraph to planning for a three-paragraph essay marked the point at which she was asked to think about

writing at a more formal level. Two weeks later, the class was divided into the two groups. With the reorganization, Flora moved to the opposite end of the table to work with Hillary, and her writing assignments focused solely on preparing for the GED® and on writing five-paragraph essays.

Shortly after the reorganization, both groups were assigned the following prompt: Should we have one long summer break or several shorter breaks? The GED® group, under Hillary's guidance, used the prompt to plan and write five-paragraph essays. Flora completed several drafts of the essay, and while talking through an early draft with Hillary, I noticed that Flora stopped making her usual notes and simply watched as Hillary read and made her own notes in the margins of Flora's paper. It appeared that Flora handed off the work and the pen to Hillary (Field notes, observation 12). Flora did, however, use the final draft as a place to write personal notes about what she had learned about paragraph organization and, as she explained earlier, to "understand everything I am doing" (Interview 1). As Flora finished the essay, she added the Roman numerals I, II, III, IV, and V and the numbers 1, 2, and 3. According to Flora, the Roman numerals were her way of showing that she had written five paragraphs (Hillary had used Roman numerals as she introduced and described the five-paragraph essay structure), and the numbers 1, 2, and 3 signified the three supporting paragraphs (Field notes, observation 12). An image of the final product is provided in the following section.

It is interesting to note that, with the move to the GED® end of the table, Flora had to become a much more independent student. She was no longer able to work with and talk with the other adult learners. She also lost opportunities to spontaneously talk

with an instructor and to ask questions as she ran into obstacles. The reorganization of the class and Flora's move to the GED® group marks the point at which Flora's habit of making notes to herself dropped off considerably. This drop makes sense when one considers that the majority of Flora's notes came from instruction, tips, and reminders provided by Suzanne. With the focus shifted to GED® preparation, Flora was expected to work independently, and her source for notes was no longer there.

Writing about Emilio.

Because so much of Flora's energy and time was devoted to her son Emilio (the coordination of Flora and Emilio's daily schedules, her concerns for his physical and emotional wellbeing, her concerns for his success in school, her purpose for attending the class), it is no surprise that she often wrote about or referenced him while writing. Of all of the writing activities that included references to Emilio, Flora's focus on her son was most intense on the evening she was tasked with completing "One Long Summer Break vs. Several Shorter Breaks." Hillary and Suzanne created this assignment specifically to introduce all of the adult learners to the concept of writing five paragraph essays by following a formula: one introductory paragraph, three supporting paragraphs, and one concluding paragraph. During the prewriting phase, Flora was asked to choose between one long summer break or several shorter breaks and to construct an argument containing three supporting ideas. She was ambivalent when Hillary asked her to make a choice and resisted in choosing one side or the other. Part of their conversation follows.

> Hillary: So, does it make a difference in the way (Emilio) learns? If he's in school all, like, if he's in school with little breaks or one big break?

Flora: Um, I don't know. I just know that it's still the same for my son. Whether he goes to summer school or doesn't, he's still at the same level. It doesn't really help him if he goes year round. I don't think it does.

H: So you don't have an opinion on that?

F: No.

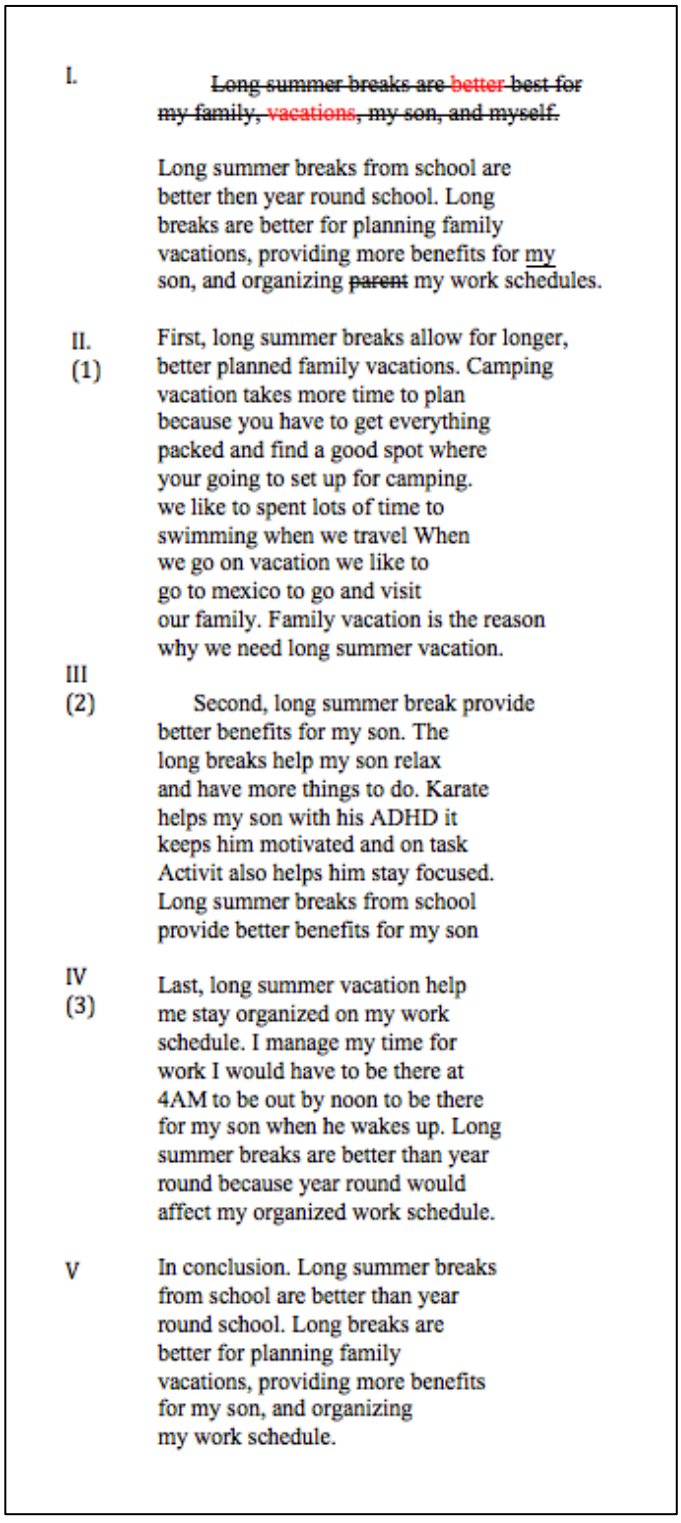
H: Could you just pick an opinion? Could you, like, make one up?

F: Um

H: So you've decided long breaks are better.

For the remainder of that evening, Hillary and Flora continued to work on Flora's essay, with Hillary frequently redirecting Flora back to the five-paragraph structure as they talked about elements of writing such as organization, grammar, parallelism, and transitions. Flora completed the essay, and we talked briefly about the finished product and the process at the end of class. We continued the conversation the following evening. (Our conversation is discussed in the next section.) The image below is an exact replica of Flora's writing, including line breaks, mark-outs, and paragraph numbering. As noted in "Writing Notes to Herself," the Roman numerals were written to signify the five paragraphs. The numbers 1, 2, and 3 were written to signify the three supporting paragraphs. The words in red text indicate words Flora wrote and marked out while constructing a thesis statement with Hillary. Flora marked out the entire thesis statement when she began to work on paragraph one.

Figure 21: Flora's writing sample: "Summer Break vs. Shorter Breaks"



I. ~~Long summer breaks are better best for my family, vacations, my son, and myself.~~

Long summer breaks from school are better then year round school. Long breaks are better for planning family vacations, providing more benefits for my son, and organizing ~~parent~~ my work schedules.

II. (1) First, long summer breaks allow for longer, better planned family vacations. Camping vacation takes more time to plan because you have to get everything packed and find a good spot where your going to set up for camping. we like to spent lots of time to swimming when we travel When we go on vacation we like to go to mexico to go and visit our family. Family vacation is the reason why we need long summer vacation.

III (2) Second, long summer break provide better benefits for my son. The long breaks help my son relax and have more things to do. Karate helps my son with his ADHD it keeps him motivated and on task Activit also helps him stay focused. Long summer breaks from school provide better benefits for my son

IV (3) Last, long summer vacation help me stay organized on my work schedule. I manage my time for work I would have to be there at 4AM to be out by noon to be there for my son when he wakes up. Long summer breaks are better than year round because year round would affect my organized work schedule.

V In conclusion. Long summer breaks from school are better than year round school. Long breaks are better for planning family vacations, providing more benefits for my son, and organizing my work schedule.

Flora's reluctance to state an opinion was most likely a result of her and Emilio's previous experience with summer school. At the time of this study, Emilio was nearing completion of his second grade year, and it was beginning to look like she would once again be asked to make this difficult decision: summer school, followed by placement in third grade or a repeat of second grade. As noted in the conversation with Hillary, she was beginning to question if her son should continue to be placed in the next grade level or if he should repeat the current grade. She questioned the benefits of staying "on track" versus the learning gaps Emilio might experience if he continued to be placed in the next grade without successful completion of the current grade. (Flora's concerns reminded me of similar concerns Jenny shared in Purcell-Gates' *Other People's Words* [1995]).

The completion of this writing assignment was a noteworthy event for Flora. I could tell that it was a somewhat challenging activity for her to complete, and she admitted at the end of class that she had been frustrated (Field notes, observation, 4/28/15). When I talked with her about the assignment the following evening, I asked if she had thought any more about the assignment, to which she replied, "I don't know. I guess I was ecstatic, amazed, surprised that I did it. I was ready to get up and go because I felt a lot of pressure, but I was thinking, 'You know what? Might as well get it done'" (Interview 1).

For Flora, a new approach to writing and a new instructor were indeed a bit challenging, but she was able to write about something she knew best, her son. While she was proud of what she had accomplished, she was also a bit frustrated by the experience and by writing in a way that "didn't make any sense" (Interview 1). The final section

takes a closer look at Flora and the point at which she began to question her own writing and the writing that was expected of her in order to pass the GED®.

Questioning the rules of writing.

True to her nature, Flora invested a great deal of time and thought into her writing assignments. As described earlier, she worked hard to complete the multiple steps of each assignment, and she took great care in assembling a finished product as proof of her efforts and as a kind of celebration of a task successfully completed. There were two instances, however, when she expressed concerns and/or dissatisfaction about the writing she had completed. The first instance occurred as Flora was finishing up "One Long Summer Break vs. Several Shorter Breaks." She and Hillary were working on a transition for the concluding paragraph of her essay. After several attempts at trying to get Flora to choose a suitable transition, Hillary remembered a previous sample of Flora's writing and left the table to get it. I had been recording the conversation between Hillary and Flora, but I pressed "pause" as Hillary walked away and Flora continued to write. Shortly after Hillary left, Flora turned to me and said that the work she was doing with Hillary was "really hard." I turned the audio recorder back on and began to talk to Flora, hoping to get a better sense of what was "really hard."

KB: Is it that you've got to get it just right? Or you've got to hurry? Or you've got to . . .

Flora: Yeah, like I have to do it right. I don't know. I just, I don't know. She just makes me get really nervous. Like, it makes me feel like I'm dumb or something. I don't know.

I had noticed that a normally talkative Flora had grown silent during the writing, and, when she did talk, it was to repeat Hillary's words or to simply say, "OK." I had also noted that Hillary was working and talking at a faster pace than Flora was accustomed to. While working at Suzanne's end of the table, Flora had been able to complete her work in chunks and to engage in informal conversations as the group moved from one activity to another. In this one-to-one setting, however, Hillary set a faster pace, and, with the exception of one break in which Flora told us about her family's camping trips, Hillary kept the work moving towards the final product: a five-paragraph essay.

A second instance of Flora questioning the rules of writing came about the following evening. Flora and I had scheduled a formal interview, and during that interview, I specifically asked her about her recent writing experience with summer breaks versus shorter breaks. Part of our conversation follows.

> KB: So yesterday, I watched as you did all of that writing. That was a lot of work. I think you did a really good job. You had a lot going on. Have you ever written that kind of . . .
>
> Flora: I've never written like that. Never in my life that I can remember, not even in school.
>
> KB: So, what do you think? Do you think you did a good job?
>
> F: I don't know. I guess I was ecstatic, amazed, surprised that I did it. I was ready to get up and go because I felt a lot of pressure, but I was thinking, "You know what? Might as well get it done."
>
> KB: Was it pretty easy to do that with the instructions Hillary gave you?

F: I don't know how to explain it. It's not so much that it's hard. I don't know if it makes any sense. It's easier than what it looks like. I guess maybe I just make it hard because, the way she explained it is just, all you're doing is just writing the first paragraph and then just taking it from there and making it longer and longer throughout the story. . . . Because it's like, in reality to me, it's just dumb that I'm having to do this paragraph and then just change up the words and do it again here, and change up the words here and do it again.

KB: So you would have done it differently?

F: I would have just, I guess like, I don't know how I would have wrote it. I mean, I would have wrote it, but just all, I guess basically all together. Not just, okay, this paragraph, and then this paragraph. Just because I never learned how to write it that way.

During both of our conversations, I knew that I needed to engage Flora in conversations about her writing, but I also knew that our conversations could not and should not fall into an evaluation of the instructors or of the work occurring in the adult education classroom. As a researcher, I was very purposeful in my questioning to make sure that our conversations only traveled down the paths Flora chose and that we would not wander into any topics that would even remotely appear to undermine Suzanne's or Hillary's work in the classroom. As a former writing teacher, I must admit that I was disheartened to hear Flora say that she felt frustrated by the task, but I was equally encouraged to hear her question the logic of writing a five-paragraph essay. As Flora explained,

> Well see, when I write, I write what I'm thinking. And as of yesterday, it was, OK, you know, (Hillary) was giving me the words that I don't feel I would have used just because that's not how I talk. It's more like it's somebody professional writing it, not me myself writing it. Even though she said, "These are all the words you're writing down and you have on your paper and you're saying," but it's not (Interview 1).

The week following Flora's completion of "One Long Summer Break vs. Several Shorter Breaks" was marked with a temporary break in the routine. All of the GED® adult learners, including Flora, and Hillary were absent for the week. (I learned later that the adult learners' absences were due to the heavy rains and the lengthy list of end-of-school activities their children were participating in.) With the drop in attendance, Suzanne worked with the ESL adults to catch up on previously uncompleted work, and on one evening, I filled in for Suzanne as she recovered from a bout of spring allergies. When Flora reappeared the following week (mid-May), Hillary had also returned and was ready to work with the adults on a writing assignment, *Minimum Wage*. (This assignment was copied from a Kaplan® test preparation book.) Because Flora's experience around completing the *Minimum Wage* writing assignment speaks most deeply to her identity as a writer, her work on the assignment, her conversations with Hillary, and samples of the various stages of her writing are described in detail in the following section.

Flora's identity as a writer.

Flora's willingness to share personal stories, to talk extensively and honestly with me, to let me sit near her as she worked, and to share samples of her work allowed me to

construct a small representation of a very complex life that, by her own admission, has been difficult. I recognize now that Flora welcomed the opportunity to be a focal participant because she saw a chance to unpack a complicated life as a willing listener carefully recorded her stories. On several occasions, Flora told stories about troubling events from her childhood and seemed to let go of emotions that she had held in check for years. There were moments that her eyes welled with tears, that she grew short of breath, and that she just simply let stories come tumbling out without concern for how they would be received. I listened and nodded and, at times, wondered if I had somehow become more of a confidant than a researcher. It was with this deep understanding of Flora that I began to think about her identity as a writer.

Just as with José, my process for examining Flora's writer identity depended largely on identifying various aspects of identity that came together within a single act of writing. It involved understanding the salient identities Flora enacted within the classroom (her past, present, and future self), the discourses available to Flora (her possibilities for self), and the perception of Flora as a writer when she is *read* by others (her perceived self). I used these three touch points to consider Flora the *writer* before, during, and after a writing activity that proved to be especially challenging for both her and Hillary and the last writing activity Flora completed before leaving the program.

Flora's past, present, and future self.

Just as with José, I depended greatly on narratives shared by Flora to better understand her past, present, and future self. She was a prolific storyteller who almost always had a story to share with the group as they completed activities and who answered

many of my interview questions by telling stories. As we talked about her early schooling experiences, she told stories about her family's frequent moves between Texas and Mexico, her frustrations with teachers who did not give her a chance to finish her work, and her appreciation for a computer teacher whose classroom became a safe haven when school and home became too stressful. As we talked about her reasons for leaving the K–12 system, she told stories about being the oldest child in a family of four, about being the responsible sibling who protected her sister and brothers, and about becoming the head of the family after her father's death. During large group conversations, she told stories about Emilio and her larger family, about work, about illnesses, and about a short stay in a local jail. Flora provided a wealth of stories, and I used these stories to form an understanding of who Flora was (her *past* self), who she is (her *present* self), and who she hopes to be (her *future* self). The table below provides descriptions of Flora's past, present, and future self as told through her narratives.

Table 14: Flora's past, present, and future self

Past	Present	Future
• A member of a patriarchal family who moved yearly between Texas and Mexico during her elementary school years	• A mother who is dedicated to meeting her son's needs and to ensuring that he is successful in school	• A mother who works in the same school her son attends • A cafeteria worker or teacher's assistant

Table 14: continued.

• The oldest of four children who served as the caretaker/protector, especially for her younger sister and especially after her father died • A student who struggled in school, especially with reading, and who worked best in small, personalized settings • A writer who used journaling to work through personal and family issues and to keep a record of her adolescent years • An owner of a used-car business	• A concerned parent who meets with school personnel to discuss her son's progress • A daughter and sibling who continues to serve as the head of the family • A convenience store employee who manages the fast food section • A community liaison who assists others with completing forms, writing letters, etc.	

Discourses available to Flora.

Through conversations and sharing personal experiences, I developed a good understanding of the past, present, and future Flora and then began to identify the discourses available to her as a former student of the K–12 system; as the caretaker for her son, her siblings, and her mother; as a community liaison; and as a convenience store employee. Because I was able to visit with Flora more extensively than any other focal participant, I came away with a deeper understanding of the discourses available to Flora. Brief descriptions of those discourses follow.

Discourses of the K–12 system.

When Flora first entered the classroom, she introduced herself first as the mother of second grader who, like her, struggled with school. As Flora talked that first evening and throughout the weeks ahead, it was evident that she has an understanding of the language and communications used within the K–12 system. She talked extensively about programs available to struggling students and used some of the labels school personnel use when describing students: dyslexic, ADHD, off task, and at-risk. Flora's familiarity with the language of the K–12 system made her a part of that community and enabled her to see herself as someone who could serve as an advocate for her son. It is interesting to note that Flora was unable to rely on the discourses of the K–12 system when talking about her own schooling experiences. In fact, with the exception of a memory of a computer lab teacher who offered her a safe haven during elementary school and of the events leading to her departure as a senior, Flora rarely spoke of her own school experiences and focused more on the events occurring outside of school. During the first

interview, Flora talked a great deal about getting to and from school and about protecting her siblings and very little about events that occurred while at school.

Discourses of employment.

After first introducing herself as a mother, Flora quickly identified herself as a convenience store employee who is responsible for the inventory, preparation, and sale of fast food items such as breakfast tacos, hot dogs, and sandwiches. As Flora described in several conversations, she was successful in this role and had recently been promoted to a managerial position. Her promotion, however, led to several instances in which she had to quickly adjust her personal schedule to work unscheduled hours. In these instances, Flora had to arrange for other family members to pick up her son from school and had to miss class, two events that deeply troubled Flora. The unexpected reschedules bothered Flora so deeply that she talked to her supervisor about a more predictable, part-time schedule. When the supervisor failed to address Flora's concerns, Flora decided to send an email to the next level of management describing the supervisor's failure to follow through with Flora's request. Before sending the email, Flora talked about her options with Suzanne and me. During the conversation, Flora asked how to appropriately begin and close a work-related email and who to include in the email as a courtesy copy (cc). Our conversation indicated that Flora was aware of the language and procedures used within her company's hierarchy and was able to use them to accomplish personal goals.

Flora felt a great sense of accomplishment the day she sent the email. That evening in class, she told us about sending the email and waiting for the reply. A few evenings later, Flora talked about the supervisor's harsh reaction when she learned about

the email but also the final result: Flora's work hours were reduced to part-time and were guaranteed to occur during school hours.

Flora's understanding of the discourses related to her job was also evident in one of the writing activities she completed with Hillary. The exercise required her to read two passages, one written in favor of increasing the minimum wage and the other written in opposition. After reading the two essays, Hillary instructed Flora to begin drafting a response. As Flora planned, she thought about her own work experiences and included personal examples in the prewriting activity and, later, in the rough draft. When reading through, however, Hillary questioned Flora's additions and instructed her to use evidence provided only in the assigned articles. This redirection from personal experience to text evidence slowed Flora's progress in writing the practice essay. Flora stopped writing independently, and from there, relied on Hillary to edit and revise the rough draft.

Discourses of government processes.

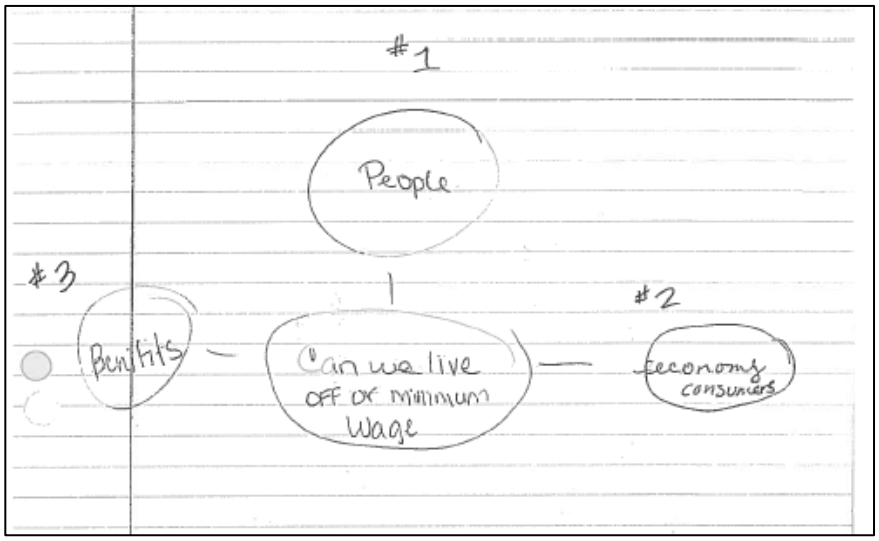
Flora also has an extensive understanding and knowledge of the discourses present within local, state, and federal government processes such providing proof of financial stability when leasing an apartment, applying for and transferring automobile titles, and completing Medicaid forms. Because of her own experiences as a used car dealer, as the mother of a child who qualifies for Medicaid assistance, and as a trusted community member who helps others find safe, reliable transportation and housing, Flora is a liaison between family and friends and the bureaucratic systems they must sometimes navigate. They look to Flora to assist in completing forms, in writing letters, and in checking off the numerous tasks often associated with bureaucratic systems.

Flora brought a wealth of personal experiences and knowledge to the GED® classroom. She was able to use the discourses of K–12 schooling, employment, and government; to support herself and her family; and to assist other community members. As someone who was competent and confident in the discourses of various regulated systems (school, employment, government), Flora's entry into the GED® program seemed to be a brief but necessary detour in her journey towards her future self.

A single act of writing.

Shortly after moving to the GED® end of the table, Flora had the opportunity to apply her knowledge of the discourses of employment in a writing assignment. The activity, titled *Minimum Wage*, required the writer to read two passages—one for raising the minimum wage and the other against—and then write to explain which position was best supported. The activity, which took place over two evenings, began on a Monday evening when Suzanne was overseeing the work of both groups. (Hillary was still responsible for teaching at another site on Monday evenings.) Flora arrived at 6:30 p.m., and Suzanne handed the assignment to Flora and asked that she read the two passages and write a response. Flora took her place at the GED® end of the table, where she sat by herself for a few minutes until another student arrived and received the same assignment. He, too, moved to that end of the table and sat a few chairs down from Flora. Suzanne continued to work with the ESL group as Flora read and then began to plan her writing. Flora used a common prewriting strategy and one that she had practiced earlier with Suzanne—mind mapping—to plan her writing. Flora's prewriting work appears below.

Figure 22: Flora's mind map: *Minimum Wage*

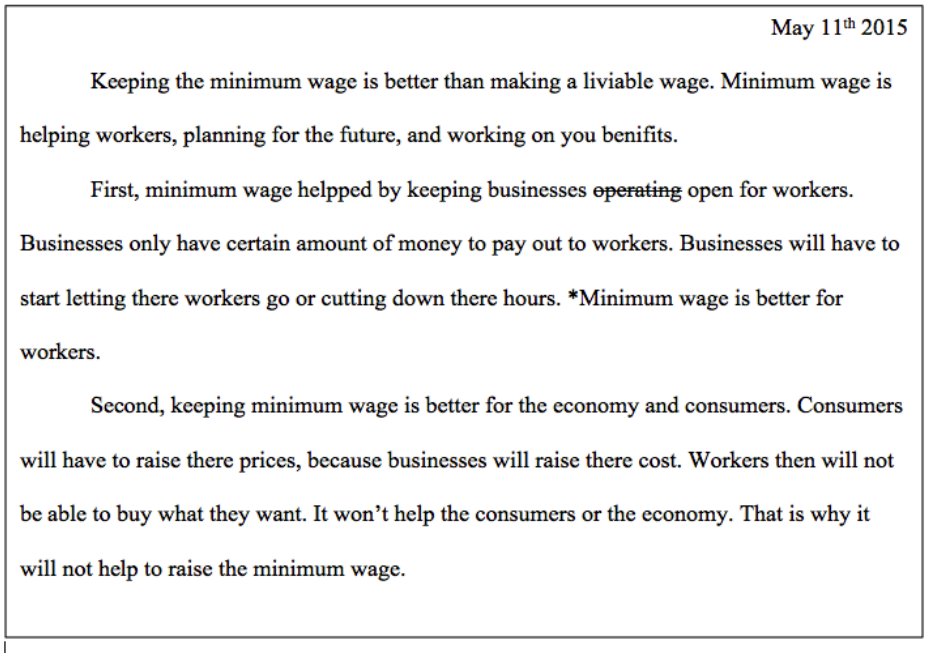


Flora's mind map shows that she planned to follow the steps explained several evenings earlier during the "One Long Summer Break vs. Several Shorter Breaks" activity. Hillary and Suzanne introduced the writing activity so all of the adult learners could work through the steps of the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing—and learn how to organize their writing according to a traditional five-paragraph structure—introductory paragraph with a thesis statement, three supporting paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Even though everyone received the same assignment, the adult learners were still divided into two groups and still worked at opposite ends of the table. At Hillary's end of the table, each adult learner was given a handout explaining the five-paragraph structure and a handout listing transition and linking words. As Hillary talked through the handouts, she explained that it is important to know the five-paragraph essay structure because, "The GED® wants you to write a five paragraph essay." Hillary also showed the group how to use the mind mapping strategy

when prewriting. When Flora was tasked with completing the *Minimum Wage* activity, she referenced the handouts and, as her prewriting indicates, she recalled that she needed to begin with a thesis statement (the center bubble) and list three supporting ideas.

After completing the reading and prewriting work, which took about 25 minutes, Flora moved on to writing, pausing frequently to look around the room, look back over the passages, or watch the activities at the other end of the table. She continued to write and pause for the remainder of the class. She paused so frequently that it sometimes seemed that she had decided not to work on the writing activity at all, but by the end of the evening, she had completed three paragraphs.

Figure 23: *Minimum Wage*, first three paragraphs



May 11th 2015

Keeping the minimum wage is better than making a liviable wage. Minimum wage is helping workers, planning for the future, and working on you benifits.

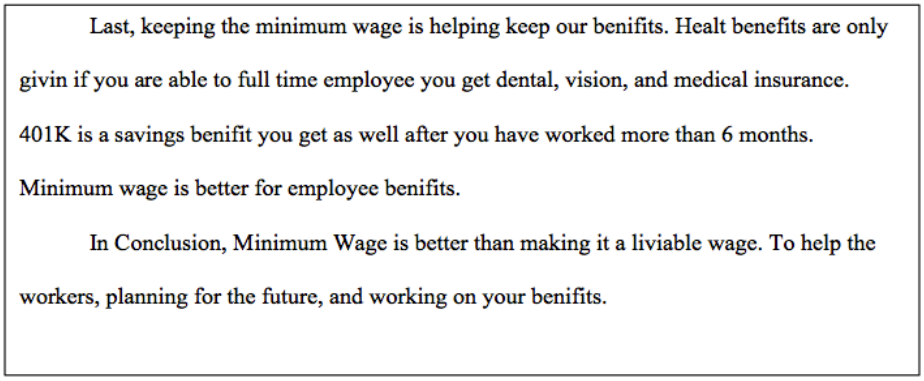
First, minimum wage helpped by keeping businesses ~~operating~~ open for workers. Businesses only have certain amount of money to pay out to workers. Businesses will have to start letting there workers go or cutting down there hours. *Minimum wage is better for workers.

Second, keeping minimum wage is better for the economy and consumers. Consumers will have to raise there prices, because businesses will raise there cost. Workers then will not be able to buy what they want. It won't help the consumers or the economy. That is why it will not help to raise the minimum wage.

When Flora returned to class the following evening, she took her seat, pulled out her papers, and continued to write. She added the final two paragraphs (below), and then

handed her paper to me to read. As I began to read, Flora said, “I wasn’t too happy with the last idea.”

Figure 24: *Minimum Wage*, last two paragraphs



Last, keeping the minimum wage is helping keep our benifits. Healt benefits are only givin if you are able to full time employee you get dental, vision, and medical insurance. 401K is a savings benifit you get as well after you have worked more than 6 months. Minimum wage is better for employee benifits.

In Conclusion, Minimum Wage is better than making it a liviable wage. To help the workers, planning for the future, and working on your benifits.

I read through, noting that Flora followed the five-paragraph format Hillary had instructed her to follow, and also noting that ideas from her own work experience were woven throughout the essay. Hillary was also present, and she, too, read Flora’s paper. When Hillary finished reading, she talked through points Flora had made in her writing and asked Flora questions about her position (“So, you decided to take the side of the businesses. Right?”), about the textual evidence she used (“Are benefits referenced in the essays?”), and about her understanding of the facts as they were presented in the two passages (“When [employers] give you less work, what happens?”). Flora attempted to answer Hillary’s questions, but she grew silent and began reading through the two passages, looking for sentences or words that could support the ideas she had included in her writing. At one point, Flora explained to Hillary that she remembered reading about food stamps as an employee benefit, but when she located the sentence and read it again, she was unable to explain a connection. Hillary continued to read through Flora’s work

and reminded her of the importance of adding evidence from the text. At one point, she told Flora,

> They gave us a lot, in these two essays, they gave us a lot of statistics. Like, actual scientific, data-based facts. And they would really help your argument if you can use the facts that they gave you specifically. So, here they talked about, um, here: "If they increase minimum wage by $2.85, it would cost half a million jobs." Half a million people would lose their jobs if we raised minimum wage. OK, so that's really, that's a really powerful statement, a really big compelling reason not to raise it.

Hillary continued to read, pointing out text evidence Flora might incorporate into her writing. She also made note of grammatical and mechanical errors as she read and explained that Flora would need to correct the errors as she worked on her next draft.

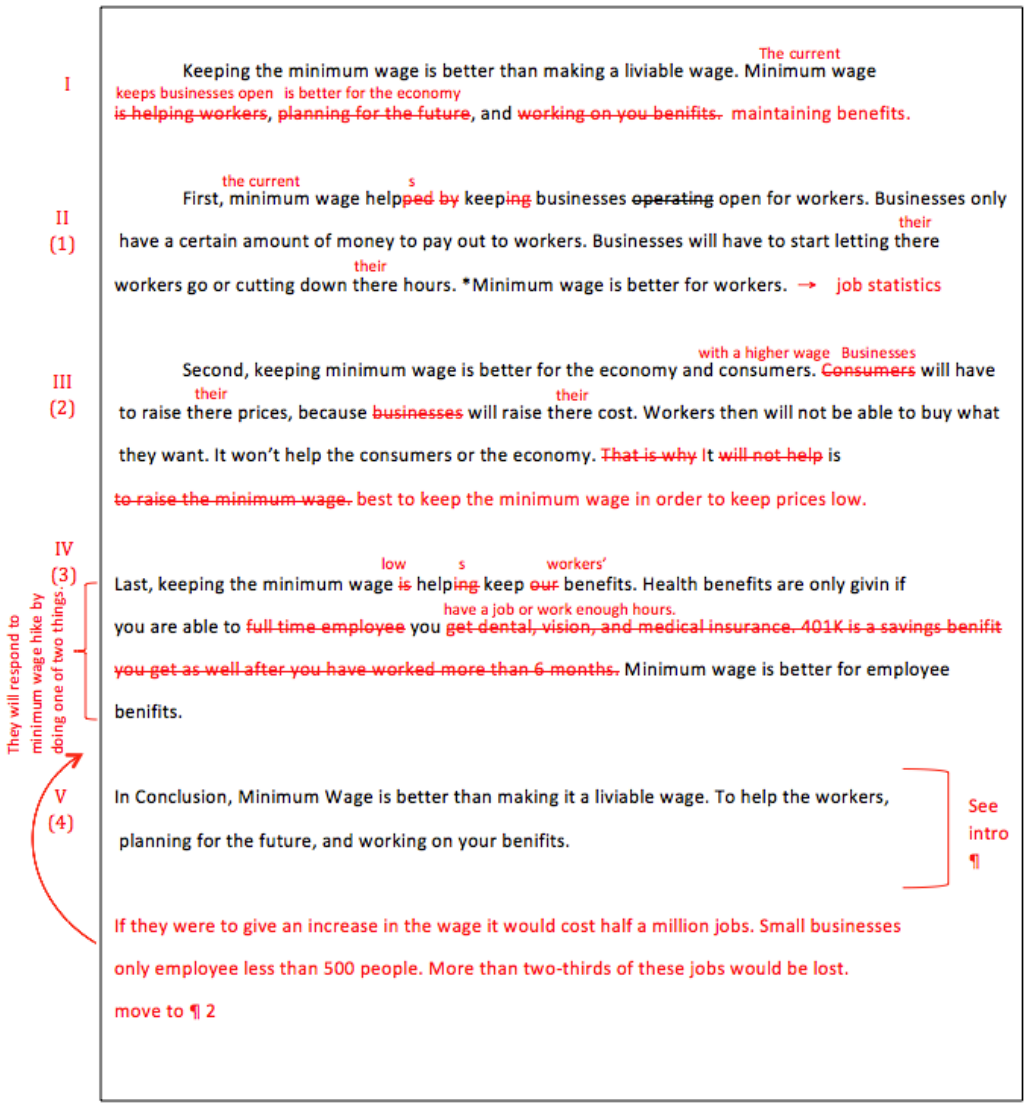
> I also want you, when you're done (finding text evidence), go back and check your spelling, look for run-on sentences, look for grammar, look for their/they're/there, its/it's—one has an apostrophe, and one doesn't—things like that.

As Hillary talked, she made revising and editing notes on Flora's paper, and Flora responded with short "OKs," repeated Hillary's words, questioned Hillary to make sure she understood the editing and revising instructions, and, at times, appeared to defend her writing decisions. The conversation between Hillary and Flora lasted for approximately 12 minutes. At the end of the conversation, Hillary returned the paper to Flora with the following instructions:

> You wrote a rough draft, and then we did corrections, which is proofreading. And now, I want you to rewrite it. So, this is a rewrite. I've got some paper. . . . Um, you went through the planning and then the rough draft and then the editing and the proofreading, and now we have what we call a final draft. OK? So go ahead and rewrite it, fixing, making corrections, making everything very clear, checking your grammar and your spelling, making sure that everything makes sense.

Flora responded with an, "Oh, wow," and began to look through her *Minimum Wage* draft, which now represented a combination of Flora's original writing and Hillary's edits and revisions. An image of the draft follows. The black text represents Flora's original writing. The red text represents Hillary's edits and revisions—which include mark-outs of Flora's writing—and notes for Flora to reference as she wrote a final draft.

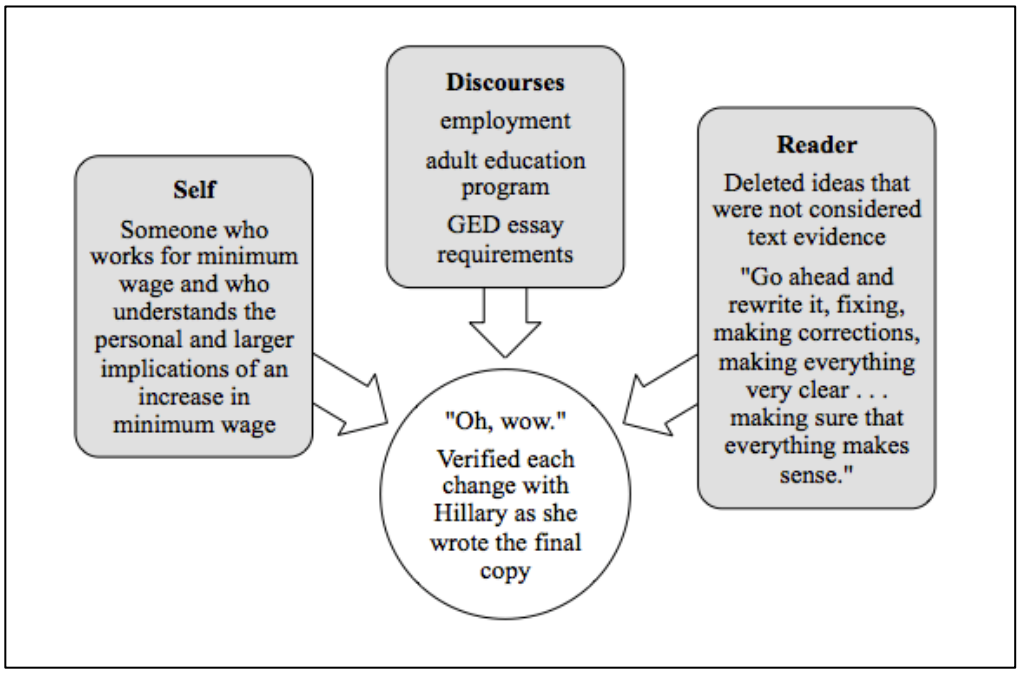
Figure 25: *Minimum Wage* with Hillary's edits and revisions



Flora began the activity as a confident but somewhat jaded writer. She had personal connections to the topic and knowledge of the discourses needed to complete the activity. She had also practiced and reluctantly incorporated the five-paragraph essay into her writing routine. She was prepared to be a successful writer, but that identity was lost in her interactions with Hillary, in her revisions, and in the final essay. Figure 26 provides

a visual representation of the identity work occurring within that single act of writing. While viewing the figure, consider the personal sense of *self* Flora brought to the activity, the *discourses* Flora drew from as she wrote, and the identity constructed as the *reader* (Hillary) responded to Flora the writer. Flora's statement following the proofreading exercise—"Oh, wow"—and her actions as she completed the essay speak a great deal to the writer identity constructed from this single act of writing.

Figure 26: Identity work as Flora completes a single act of writing



Flora completed her rewrite that evening and assembled all of her papers—prompt, prewriting, rough draft, and final copy—into one stack. She wished for a stapler so she could staple all of the papers together, and then she put the papers away in her folder and moved on to the math classroom. I sensed that Flora was pleased that she had finished her work, but I wondered how she felt about the final product, especially in light

of her earlier comments about the five-paragraph essay structure. I hoped to talk to her about the essay at a future meeting, but Flora missed the next class, returned for one final class, and then permanently left the program. I could not help but wonder if Flora had finally given in to the frustration she felt from being moved to the smaller, isolated GED® group or having to work at a faster pace than she liked. I also wondered if Flora felt that she had unlocked the mystery of writing for the GED®—no matter how redundant and "dumb" it seemed—and decided that she no longer needed to practice with Hillary. As you'll recall from an earlier conversation about writing a five-paragraph essay, Flora shared the following:

> All you're doing is just writing the first paragraph and then just taking it from there and making it longer and longer throughout the story. . . . Because it's like, in reality to me, it's just dumb that I'm having to do this paragraph and then just change up the words and do it again here, and change up the words here and do it again.

It is very possible that there were other factors in Flora's exit from the program, but the events of that evening seemed to be a tipping point for Flora. She was once again asked to write using a structure and rules that she questioned, but she saw an opportunity to write about something she knew. She used her experiences as an employee and her knowledge of the discourses of employment to complete an essay, but she watched as Hillary marked out ideas that were not considered to be text evidence. In short, Flora wrote with authority, but Hillary edited, revised, and questioned until Flora's authority was removed from the final product. I am certain that this was not a conscious act on

Hillary's part. I propose, however, that in order to get to an essay that fit the rules of the GED®, Flora's identity as a writer became a secondary consideration.

Felipe

Felipe is the third and final focal participant. He was the last to enter the program while I was there, and he is the one whom I have the least data about. He serves as an excellent example of how even brief encounters with a study participant can become very valuable, especially when studying adult learners participating in an adult education program. I had identified several other focal participants prior to Felipe's arrival, but each left the program within days of agreeing to be part of the study. I was two weeks out from completing my research, and Felipe appeared. I was encouraged by Felipe's clarity of purpose for being in the program and the intensity in which he spoke about his future plans. Just as with José and Flora, he struck me as someone who would come back each evening and who welcomed opportunities to talk about his goals. I was right.

Felipe was the youngest of the three focal participants and, because of his young age, he was the one focal participant who had distinct, recent memories of his final years in the K–12 system. He attended schools in a nearby district, so, as he talked, he referenced specific teachers who still work in the district; neighborhoods and convenience stores he visited before, during, and after school; memories of taking Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exams; and friends he still sees while out in the community.

Shortly after joining the class, Felipe explained that he wants to earn a GED®, attend community college, and then join the Marines Corps (Field notes, observation 20).

He planned to enlist by meeting the qualifications for a program known as GED® Plus—a GED® plus 15 hours college credit. The GED® plus college credit would allow Felipe to enlist with the same classification as a high school graduate. (The Marine Corps uses a tiered enlistment system. High school graduates receive higher preference over non-high school graduates.)

Felipe left high school as a junior. As he explained it, he was never devoted to school and often had "distractions in (his) way" (Interview 1). He decided to leave after he and his girlfriend got married and then later learned they were going to be parents. Felipe recalled,

> Yeah, I got married, and then, maybe like eight months later, she found out she was pregnant, so, yeah. So I dropped out and I was working, and, yeah. And then, as soon as we got divorced, I decided to go back (to school). You know, it's not too late to go back.

Soon after his divorce, Felipe began participating in the adult education program and then left to work at construction sites in the northeast. He had been gone for about four months when he returned that spring. Suzanne was glad to see Felipe return, and he was glad to be back and ready to resume his work. He seemed a bit impatient and a bit rushed, but he was willing to listen carefully to Suzanne and Hillary and to begin checking off the steps needed to complete the GED®. On that first evening back in the classroom, he, Suzanne, and Hillary decided he would focus on writing a five-paragraph essay.

Felipe's practices as a learner in the adult education classroom.

I did not have many opportunities to observe Felipe, but in the short time we were together I noted that he was quick to identify and apologize for what he perceived to be gaps in his learning (Field notes, observation 19). When talking to Hillary, he pointed out that he did not know grammar rules, especially the use of quotation marks and commas. He attributed his lack of knowledge to not paying attention to previous teachers and to not taking school seriously, a point he continued to raise as he worked with Hillary. There were moments when Felipe seemed to regret his earlier inattentiveness and apathy, but there were also moments when he reminisced about his carefree days as a high schooler who frequently skipped class. Felipe's wavering between regret and nostalgia made him talkative, almost boastful, at times and quiet at others. For Hillary, this wavering seemed to be a bit of a challenge. She was not sure how to work with someone who displayed some of the characteristics often attributed to adolescent students—talkativeness, inattentiveness, resistance—so she seemed relieved when she and Felipe struck upon the idea for him to work independently through a lengthy series of practice exercises. Details about this decision are discussed later in this section.

Felipe's practices as a writer.

With the exception of one essay written on his first evening there, Felipe only worked at completing GED® grammar practice exercises. As noted earlier, he quickly pointed out to Hillary that he did not know grammar rules, and he and Hillary decided it would be best for him to work on practice exercises until he felt ready to try a second five-paragraph essay. If we were to think about the inverted pyramid referenced with both

José and Flora (▽), Felipe did not wish to talk or think about the large ideas of writing. He focused on the correct use of individual words when completing the few writing activities I observed.

Felipe's identity as a writer.

In spite of our brief time together, Felipe and I were able to talk about his previous and current experiences with writing. Granted, our conversations were lengthy, circuitous, and a bit challenging because Felipe wanted to talk about other things. He preferred to brag about his past indiscretions as a high schooler and to pass along local gossip about teachers who still work in the local schools, but we also managed to talk about writing. As we talked about his K–12 experiences, Felipe talked more about teachers than the writing itself. He recalled a favorite coach from his high school years who, surprisingly, served as his English teacher during his freshman, sophomore, and junior years. He recalled a teacher from his elementary years who would check in with him to make sure he understood the work. Felipe explained,

> (Mr. Martinez) also motivated me, and, you know, he always explained to me. I once told him that I was embarrassed to ask questions because I don't understand. And ever since then, he always will go to my desk when he put us to work, and he would help me out.

He recalled another teacher who was a continuous source of motivation. She would often tell him, "You can do it!" It was quite clear that his fondest memories were of teachers who understood his need for support; they offered words of encouragement and reassurances that he could ask for assistance without feeling isolated or embarrassed. For

every positive experience he recalled, he could also recall a teacher he did not like. At one point, Felipe told Suzanne and I about a teacher he especially "hated" and ended by saying that she had recently been charged with her "third or fourth DWI."

When Felipe began to wander on to new topics, I looped back to questions about writing. I asked if he remembered writing experiences while in Coach Smith's class (the English I, II, and III teacher), but he did not. As we talked about writing in general, Felipe shared what he considered to be the greatest challenges in writing.

KB: When you are writing, what do you think you're good at?

Felipe: At this moment, I don't think I am, you know? I still need to get the hang of it.

KB: OK, so what do you think you need more practice with?

F: Um, my grammar. You know, punctuation, stuff like that. Some spelling, yeah. (Hillary) agrees.

KB: So, when you think about writing, what's the least favorite part?

F: Um, not knowing what to write about.

Felipe resisted my attempts to get him to think and talk about himself as a writer. I later realized that his resistance was a reflection of his disconnect with writing. He saw it as a challenge, as something that isolated him from other students, and as something he rarely did, if at all. If his memories about Coach Smith were correct, he did not have to do a great deal of writing during his high school years. He admitted that on the few occasions he was required to write (i.e., English I, II, and III TAKS testing days), he and

his friends skipped school. In short, Felipe did not see himself as a writer and did not see value in writing. As he explained in the formal interview,

> I don't thinking (writing) is important. . . . I mean, I don't care for it. Like, because, like being this day and age, we hardly write. You know? It's like computers and technology. You know? There's a lot of technology that pretty much brought writing to a different level. . . . At the (technology) point of view, yes, I think (writing) is important, but like *writing* writing, I don't know.

With Felipe's view of writing in mind, it is important to remember that during his first evening in the classroom, he talked with Suzanne and Hillary about his goals for attending the adult education program and the requirements for successfully completing the GED®. As they explained the writing requirements, it was evident that Felipe was hearing this for the first time and that he seemed taken aback: "On the GED®, is there a lot of essays?" (Field notes, observation 19). In hindsight, I now understand that Felipe came to the program as someone who did not see value in writing and as someone who was not aware of the new GED® writing requirements. I would venture to say Felipe's optimism and drive dropped substantially when he realized that, in order to meet his goals, he would eventually have to write three essays.

Felipe's past, present, and future self.

Like José and Flora, Felipe welcomed opportunities to share stories with the other adult learners, the instructors, and me. He especially liked to share stories that built upon his identity as a carefree high schooler, but be also shared stories about his continuous struggle with a failed marriage and the ongoing tension between him and his former wife.

On a few occasions, he talked about his concerns for his daughter's wellbeing and safety, especially during the recent floods, and his hope that he could one day be in a marriage that is as strong and inspiring as his parents'. Given our short time together, I learned a great deal about Felipe through his stories. The following table provides brief descriptions of Felipe's past, present, and future self as constructed through his narratives.

Table 15: Felipe's past, present, and future self

Past	Present	Future
• A K–12 student who appreciated teachers who offered encouragement and assistance • A K–12 student who was "not that dedicated" and who frequently skipped class while in high school • A K–12 student who left school as an 11th grader	• A father of one daughter • A former husband who maintains a frustrating but necessary relationship with his former wife • A son who feels great admiration for his mother and father • A construction worker who specializes in door installations	• A community college student • A member of the Marine Corps

Table 15: continued.

• A former student of the adult education program who left and returned several months later		

Discourses available to Felipe.

From my few interactions with Felipe, I learned that he embodied discourses enacted upon him as a K–12 student, discourses available to him as a member of the surrounding community, and discourses learned through employment. Because he anticipated becoming a member of the Marine Corps, he had also begun to familiarize himself with a Discourse (Gee, 1990) associated with the military (e.g., enlistment procedures, physical requirements, training regimens). As a participant of the adult education classroom, Felipe also had access to the discourses of the adult education and GED® programs, but by the second evening, he opted to work in isolation and, consequently, to avoid learning-related interactions with the instructors and the other adult learners. Felipe was willing to be a part of the social group, but he was not willing to take part in communications related to the work occurring in the classroom or the intricacies of the GED® program.

A single act of writing.

On his first evening back in the classroom, Felipe was assigned to the GED® end of the table where Hillary explained the process for writing a five-paragraph essay. As she talked through the steps, Felipe interjected memories of high school teachers who

told him to use text evidence when writing essays. He also told Hillary that he was uncertain about some of the grammar rules, especially quotation marks and commas, but he was willing to give writing an essay a try. Hillary completed her explanation and asked Felipe to begin work on the *Minimum Wage* assignment. Felipe spent the rest of his time writing and, at the end of class, he handed a finished essay back to Hillary. I had hoped to see a copy of the completed essay, but Felipe handed it off quickly and then disappeared into the math classroom.

The following evening, Hillary began class by reading through the essay and marking errors. As she returned the paper to Felipe, she explained, "There are lots of edits, but don't be discouraged. You're out of practice" (Field notes, observation 20). Hillary suggested that Felipe complete a few practice exercises before he attempted to write again, and Felipe agreed. He reminded Hillary that, because he had been there several months earlier, he had already completed some of the exercises, but he did not remember them. As he and Hillary looked through a GED® practice book, Felipe seemed to realize that he was not going to move through the program as quickly as he hoped, and he tried to get a sense of the work that lay ahead.

Felipe: So that's how to write an essay? Like, how you showed me?

Hillary: Uh huh

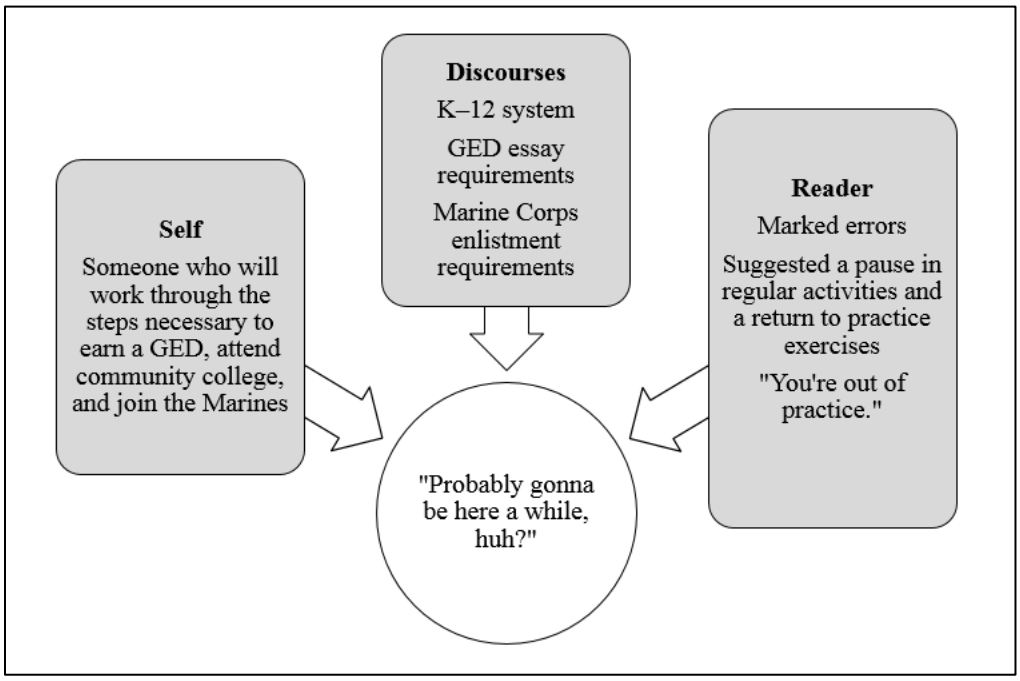
F: OK

H: Yeah, and (the practice book) has a whole section here on reading practice. . . . And then at the end you have practice questions. And it does this for every subject. It's not just for reading. So whenever you're ready, there's a practice test.

F: Probably gonna be here a while, huh?

Following their brief conversation, Felipe moved away from the GED® end of the table and created a space for himself near the middle. He did not work with Suzanne or Hillary. Rather, he worked by himself, looking up occasionally to take in the activities of the room and to add to the social conversations occurring at either end of the table. I did not see the *Minimum Wage* writing sample produced by Felipe, but I came to think of it as the one act of writing that moved Felipe away from the interactions occurring at either end of the table and into a setting in which he worked by himself. More important, I see this one act of writing as a turning point at which Felipe began to rethink his timeline in meeting his goals. Figure 27 provides a visual representation of the identity work occurring within that single act of writing. While viewing the figure, consider the personal sense of *self* Felipe brought to the activity, the *discourses* Felipe drew from as he wrote, and the identity constructed as the *reader* (Hillary) responded to Felipe the writer. Felipe's statement following the proofreading exercise—"Probably gonna be here a while, huh?"—and his move to an in-between space speak a great deal to the writer identity constructed from this single act of writing.

Figure 27: Identity work as Felipe completes a single act of writing



Felipe came to the writing activity as someone who had expressed concerns about his ability to write, admiration for teachers who encouraged and supported him, and fear of being singled out and embarrassed. He also spent a great deal of time building upon his identity as someone who flouted the conventions of the K–12 system. With this in mind, it was difficult to watch as a focused and driven Felipe entered the program and, within a few days, found himself mired in a system that replicated many of the obstacles he avoided as a K–12 student.

Conclusion

José, Flora, and Felipe shared similar experiences as they came to and made their way through the adult education program. All three struggled both in and out of school as K–12 students. All three exited the K–12 system during their high school years. All three

made personal decisions to return to a learning environment, to resume their roles as students, and to complete the steps required to earn a GED®. All three regarded writing as a challenging but necessary activity, especially if they were to become their future selves: José as a small business owner, Flora as a school employee, and Felipe as a member of the Marine Corps.

As learners, José, Flora, and Felipe shared similar stories of K–12 teachers who gave them individualized attention, who encouraged them, and who motivated them. They recalled difficult experiences of feeling singled out or left behind. When they encountered obstacles in the adult education classroom, they quickly pointed out their learning gaps and suggested that they could do better with "more practice." They enjoyed interacting with the other adult learners and the instructors of the adult education program. They welcomed opportunities to talk about their families and their lives beyond the classroom.

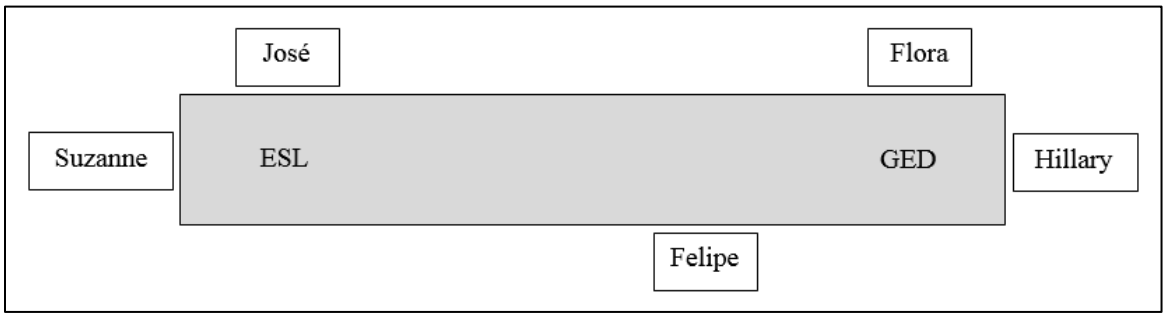
As writers, José, Flora, and Felipe relied on their K–12 experiences to define themselves as writers (or not) and to engage in conversations about writing. They told the instructors that they needed more practice with the rules of writing. They were given opportunities to think and write beyond the rules, but, as if by reflex, each came back to an intense focus on the correctness of the individual word (e.g., the spelling, the tense, the agreement). They each encountered obstacles as they wrote, and each reached a point where they were frustrated by what they were asked to do as writers. There was comfort in working with the concrete (e.g., the commas, the quotation marks, the verb tenses). There was a great deal of discomfort in working with the abstract (e.g., the relevance, the

audience, the structure) and in receiving direction and feedback that seemed to take them further and further away from their goals.

José, Flora, and Felipe also had very different experiences as they came to and made their way through the adult education program. Their attendance and participation varied. Their interactions with the instructors and the other adult learners varied. Their acceptance of or resistance to the learning objectives varied.

Their locations at the classroom table greatly influenced their individual experiences as learners and writers. A place at the ESL end of the table meant working and talking with the other adult learners, sharing personal experiences, practicing the rules of writing, writing responses to the evening's reading activity, and, on occasion, pushing back when activities seemed irrelevant or inappropriate. A place at the GED® end of the table meant working independently, practicing the rules of the five-paragraph essay, writing responses to GED® practice prompts, and accepting the questionable but necessary steps a writer must take in order to pass a GED® exam. While José, Flora, and Felipe occasionally sat at other locations around the table, their primary locations were as follows:

Figure 28: The three focal participants and their locations at the table

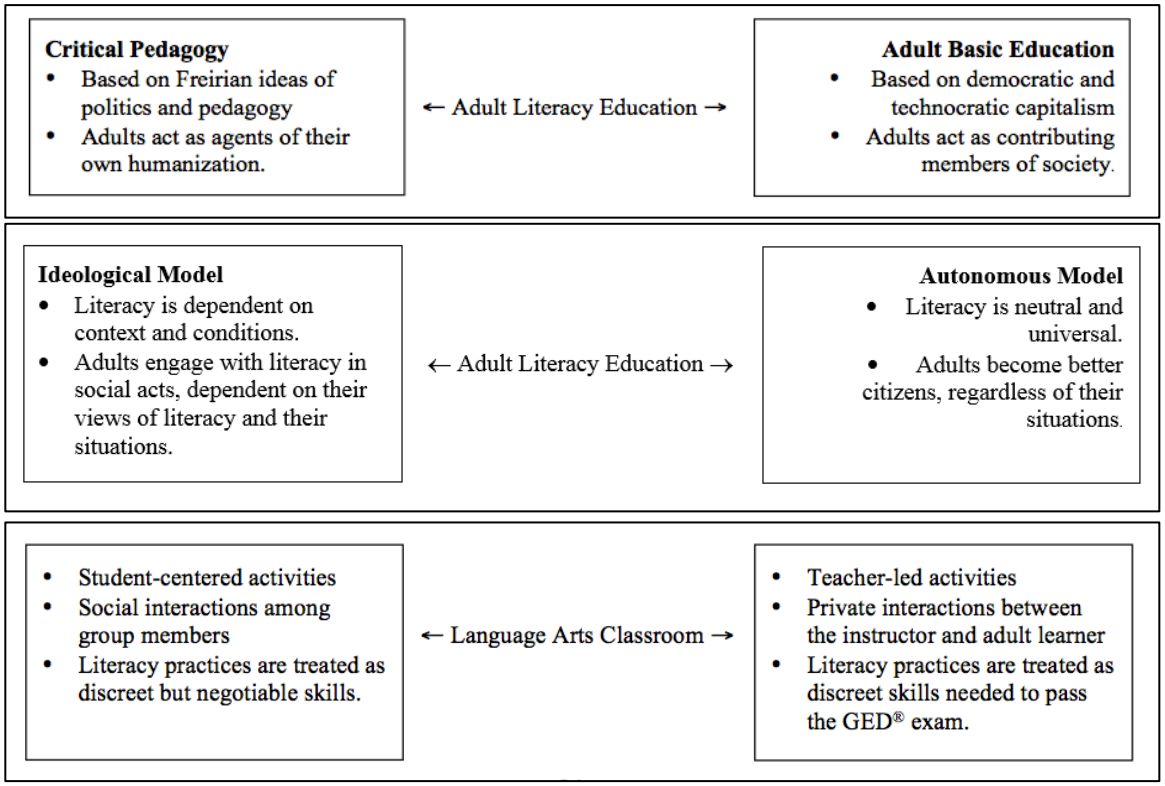


Each learner took a very different path to find his or her place at the table. Each, on occasion, looked at other places and wondered if he or she had found the right spot. By the end of the study, José sat with Suzanne and the ESL group and continued to "practice more," Felipe sat near the middle and continued to make his way through GED® grammar practice exercises, and Flora was gone. I do not presume to know the reason (or reasons) Flora left, but I cannot help but think about the frustration she felt as she wrestled with the rules of the five-paragraph essay. I also cannot help but think about her realization that the writing had little to do with her own knowledge and experiences and more to do with a blind acceptance of process that, according to Flora, seemed "dumb."

Given what was learned from José, Flora, and Felipe, I have come to appreciate the delicate balance many adult education programs must strike: building upon the writing practices and writer identities of adult learners while working within the narrow confines of the institutions they serve. Writing within this language arts classroom served as a powerful reminder of the complexities of writing and of how a middle ground is possible but not easily attainable in light of high stakes testing mandates. For this classroom, I saw the continuums proposed in chapter two in action, and I saw how the

larger, divisive conversations can come to rest at two ends of one table. Consider the continuums referenced earlier, but now let's add the language arts classroom.

Figure 29: Comparison of continuums and the language arts classroom



This comparison is not to say that the language arts classroom served as a perfect example of the divides between adult literacy instructional approaches or adult literacy models. All research should be so easy. Rather, it is to note that components of the two approaches and models were present. Suzanne saw herself as a liberating instructor, but her histories and experiences (*and* the adult learners') continued to pull her back to traditional practices. Hillary saw herself as a well-informed instructor, but her histories and experiences (*and* the adult learners') continued to pull her into frustrating,

incomplete conversations about writing. Everyone hoped for clear boundaries, clear rules, and clear, uncomplicated writing paths. There were no black and white moments for the instructors or for the adult learners who worked with them. There were lots of gray moments. For those of us who work with writing, this comes as no surprise. We embrace the gray moments and go from there.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

This study is the result of my deep and abiding belief in the power of writing. It is the result of my work with adolescent and adult writers. It is the result of my belief in educators and in their abilities to create communities of writers in any setting and under the most challenging circumstances. These beliefs are my safe harbor in light of the incredible burden placed on educators to prepare writers—children and adults—for high stakes writing tests and of those who presume to say that writing can be reduced to a series of checklists and formulas, that it can be measured on one day and within a few hours. Writing is far more complicated. It is the result of conversations and negotiations and thinking and erasing and thinking more. It comes from stories and experiences. It is messy and frustrating. It is joyful and relaxing. It heals. It elevates. It is a social act. This study provides evidence of these complexities. More important, it gives insight into the potential roles of educators as they work with beginning, novice, and experienced writers and as they uncover and transform writer identities.

This study investigated a group of adult learners as they worked in the language arts classroom of the Education Center, a satellite site for a larger organization that sponsors community-based adult education programs throughout Central Texas. The Education Center provided ESL and GED® classes for adults in both day and evening classes. The study focused primarily on three adult learners—José, Flora, and Felipe—as they worked with instructors to complete writing activities. Because the writing activities largely depended on planning and decisions made by the instructors, the study also

followed the two instructors—Suzanne and Hillary—as they led the adult learners through acts of writing. This inquiry explored the following questions:

1. What is the nature of writing in an adult education program?
2. How do the adult learners develop practices as writers while working within an adult education program?
3. How are the adult learners' identities as writers shaped as they complete writing activities within an adult education program?

This examination of writing activities was particularly timely in light of the January 2014 transition to the fifth generation of the GED®. The latest version, which is now entirely computer based, is marketed as a more complex test developed in response to an increase in technology-aided jobs and a decrease in workers who are able to read and write a variety of texts and to use language in more precise, specialized ways. The Reasoning Through Language Arts (RLA) test in particular includes a writing component that "integrates reading and writing into meaningful tasks that require candidates to support their written analysis with evidence drawn from a given source text(s) of appropriate complexity provided in the test" ("Reasoning through language arts," n.d.). The new requirements raised numerous questions about how the Education Center might go about preparing adults for the extended response (ER) items and how the adult learners would respond.

The adult literacy research community is well aware of federal and state calls for improved literacy skills in adults entering postsecondary education and the workforce, the programs established as a result of national-, state-, and community-sponsored initiatives,

and the various approaches programs take in working with adults. Researchers are beginning to learn more about the educators who work within adult education programs and the instructional decisions they make when working with adult learners (Rocha-Schmid, 2010; Rogers & Kramer; 2000; Wortham, 2008). Researchers are also beginning to learn more about the adults who enroll in these programs, particularly their motivations for entering and leaving programs, and their social identities, beliefs, and transformations as they acknowledge personal struggles and the need to improve literacy skills (Bridwell, 2013; Greenberg et al, 2013; Purcell-Gates, 1993; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Stromquist, 2013). These examples of learner-focused research provide invaluable understandings of the learners who enter adult education programs. This study, in turn, sought to add to the collective knowledge by exploring the writing practices of adult learners, particularly in light of the increased writing demands of the 2014 GED®, and their writer identities as they completed writing activities within the language arts classroom.

Writing practices of adult learners seem to be a rather straightforward and necessary research endeavor, but why writer identity? As a former teacher of secondary English language arts and as a current teacher consultant for the National Writing Project, I am frequently reminded that writing begins at a most basic level, at a relationship level. It begins with conversations in which we talk as writers. We talk about what we want to say; we ask questions; we think; we try out ideas; we establish what is valuable and relevant to us. Our conversations help us see each other and ourselves as writers—an important point to remember as we encourage reluctant writers. The identity work, however, does not stop there. As we write, we draw from other factors that contribute to

writer identity. We draw from the autobiographical self, which is shaped by the writer's life history; the discoursal self, which is reconstructed throughout each act of writing; and the authorial self, which determines a writer's ownership and voice throughout the writing process (Clark & Ivanič, 1997). Clearly, writing is more than what is put on paper. It is also about identity, and this is particularly important when we consider that many adult learners struggle with negative self-images (Bridwell, 2013; Crowther, Maclachlan, & Tett, 2010; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Howard & Logan, 2012) and that many come to literacy programs "bound by their histories and access to different discourses" (Fernsten, 2008, p. 45). It was not unreasonable to think that the adult learners of this study brought similar, personal challenges and experiences to the Education Center, and those early assumptions proved correct.

Writing and writing instruction is a complex undertaking, even when attempted in the most favorable conditions. When we add the complicating factors often present in adult education programs (e.g., interrupted or incomplete schooling; time constraints; work, home, and family responsibilities; high-stakes testing) and the new writing requirements of the 2014 GED® exam, this study became much more timely and necessary.

Discussion of Findings

The nature of writing.

This study examined the nature of writing in an adult education classroom, the adult learners' writing practices, and the adult learners' writer identities. Chapter four addressed the question, "What is the nature of writing in an adult education program?"

Data indicated that writing was one of many activities nestled within a framework of institutional rules and requirements, an activity guided by the instructors' own experiences as writers, and an activity weighted by previous experiences with writing.

While Outreach, Inc. provided overarching guidelines and goals for the adult education program in general, the two instructors—Suzanne and Hillary—were given extensive latitude in how they structured the language arts classroom and how they delivered instruction. As the classroom underwent the reorganization, the ESL group moved to one end of the table to work with Suzanne; the GED® group moved to the other end to work with Hillary. This move seemed to be disruptive to some of the adult learners, especially Flora, who clearly expressed a desire to work with a group of peers and in a low-risk environment. Suzanne and Hillary, however, were compelled to divide the classroom, primarily out of their concerns for more focused GED® test preparation. Because Suzanne and Hillary had little experience as adult education instructors, they relied greatly on their experiences as K–12 and university students and their brief experiences as educators to plan and deliver writing instruction to the adult learners. As a result, writing looked quite different at the two ends of the table.

The instructors.

For Suzanne, writing was an activity in which the adult learners were encouraged to take chances and were assured that it was okay to be wrong. She looked to the adult learners to inform her work and remained open to new activities and ideas when the adult learners became frustrated or struggled with an activity. She encouraged conversations—instructional and social—throughout the evening and created a deep sense of community

among the members of the ESL group. Suzanne saw her instructor role as someone who should strike a balance between finding teachable moments (i.e., correcting errors) and giving the adult learners the freedom to write.

For Hillary, writing was an activity in which the adult learners were given the steps and tips needed to successfully write for the GED®. She explained testing requirements and the steps of the five-paragraph essay (an approach that, according to Hillary and the various trainings she completed, guaranteed success on the GED®). She talked to each writer at various steps in the writing process and made extensive edits and revisions to their rough drafts. Because Hillary relied greatly on what she had learned through GED® trainings, she was uncomfortable with veering away from what she knew about the exam and the five-paragraph essay. For that reason, she and the adult learners often became tangled and frustrated in conversations about writing, especially conversations about the more complex components of writing. As I watched Hillary and various adult learners struggle with the difficult-to-answer questions, I was reminded of the failings of the banking model referenced by Freire (2000) but also of references to the classroom as a "black box," especially when paired with conversations about testing (Cuban, 2013). The *inputs* of the outer world—rules, requirements, high-stakes testing—had come to rest at Hillary's end of the table, and she and the adult learners struggled to produce the expected *outputs*. These moments spoke deeply to the importance of an educator's critical awareness of the many systems at work within the classroom.

Hillary saw her instructor role as someone who knew the steps needed to be successful on the GED®. She was dedicated to passing those steps along and helping each

adult learner understand that writing was a relatively straightforward process. She wanted the adults at her end of the table to learn the "code," but was not aware that she, too, had the authority to lead the adult learners into conversations and activities in which they could "break the code" (Freire & Macedo, 2013) of written texts.

Suzanne and Hillary's roles were greatly constrained by the limitations of the classroom (e.g., time, attendance, materials, institutional goals), by their inexperience with writing instruction, and by their limited understandings of writing as a skill in which "writers' histories, processes, and identities vary" (Yancey, 2015, p. 53). They gave the adult learners the tools needed to successfully navigate traditional forms of ESL and GED® education, but they did not see opportunities to move beyond traditional roles and to treat writing as a means of empowerment. This additional step seems crucially necessary in light of a new and rapidly growing economy (i.e., the knowledge economy) that places greater importance on the written text. As Brandt (2015) notes,

> In (the knowledge) economy texts serve as a chief means of production and a chief output of production, and writing becomes a dominant form of manufacturing. . . . As the nature of work in the United States has changed—toward making and managing information and knowledge in increasingly globalized settings—intense pressure has come to bear on the productive side of literacy, the writing side (Brandt, 2004; Drucker, 2003) (p. 3).

Suzanne and Hillary led adult learners through activities designed to meet present, pressing goals, but they did not recognize writing as a tool that enables the adult learners to feet future goals and to move closer to their possible selves (Rossiter, 2009). This

critical awareness is a lot to expect from beginning teachers who, by their own admission, continued to wrestle with their roles as writing instructors. It is, however, something we should keep in mind as we think about our roles in serving adults who operate within a technology-dependent world where writing is a highly valued and necessary skill. We can support adult learners in meeting present, institution-based goals, but our greater charge is to encourage adult learners to look beyond the present milestones (or obstacles) and to work towards the larger, personal goals that truly matter. It was my experience that each adult learner had far greater goals than passing the GED® or becoming more proficient in English. The language arts classroom was one step in a much longer journey.

The adult learners.

The adult learners placed a great deal of trust in Suzanne and Hillary. They, at times, grew frustrated and uncomfortably silent, but they looked to the two instructors as the authorities in writing. And, with only a few notable exceptions, they wrote each and every time Suzanne or Hillary asked them to. As the adult learners wrote, they brought personal histories to each act of writing. They referred to their histories as they talked to each other and the instructors about previous and current struggles with writing (i.e., grammar, spelling, punctuation), as they talked in smaller settings about their personal connections to writing, and as they talked in private about their frustrations with writing. The adult learners were quick to identify weaknesses (or gaps) in their writing, and they used their weaknesses for dual purposes. In some instances, weaknesses were used to blame previous teachers or experiences or to explain why they struggled with writing activities. In others, weaknesses were referenced and then ignored as the adult learners

clarified what they did know and what they were able to do. The adult learners also used their weaknesses as talking points with the instructors. They reminded the instructors they needed practice with grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and they pushed the instructors to define what was correct and expected in their writing. A tremendous amount of time and talk was spent on rules and expectations and guidelines and correctness.

The adult learners' continuous references to weaknesses and rules serve as a powerful reminder that early experiences with writing can inform writers as they move through the K–12 system and out into the larger world. I am certain each of us has memories of a teacher (or teachers) who stressed the importance of a properly placed comma, a correctly spelled word, a carefully arranged paragraph. These are important points to address, but they are not the only points. I fear many classroom conversations about writing have become too narrow, too black and white, and when it is necessary to talk beyond the rules, we lack the words and understanding to talk about writing at a deeper level. The participants of this study are good examples of how conversations can stall and even become frustrating when conversations about writing become complicated. We will do well to talk about writing at all levels, even the complicated parts, and to admit to our students that we, too, have struggled with writing. We need to make *our* writing processes visible and invite conversations and questions about the many ways writing can be accomplished.

Writing practices and writer identities.

Chapter five addressed the questions, "How do the adult learners develop practices as writers while working within an adult education program?" and "How are the adult learners' identities as writers shaped as they complete writing activities within an adult education program?" To answer these questions, I observed, talked to, and examined writing samples from three focal participants—José, Flora, and Felipe—to get an understanding of their schooling experiences before enrolling in the adult education program, their practices as learners and writers in and out of the classroom, and their writer identities before, during, and after acts of writing.

The three focal participants.

José, Flora, and Felipe shared similar experiences as they came to and made their way through the adult education program. All three struggled both in and out of school as K–12 students. All three exited the K–12 system during their high school years. All three made personal decisions to return to a learning environment, to resume their roles as students, and to complete the steps required to earn a GED®. All three regarded writing as a challenging but necessary activity, especially if they were to become their future selves.

As I got to know each of the focal participants, I marveled at their resiliency and dedication. They managed multiple responsibilities throughout the day—work, family, community—and they came to the adult education classroom each evening to navigate a world in which they were compelled to set aside their authority as adults, become students, and take on roles they rejected or resisted during their K–12 schooling. Acts

such as this speak to the commitments many adult learners make—to themselves, their families, their employers—to complete personal journeys.

José, Flora, and Felipe provided valuable insights into their practices and identities as writers. They also allowed glimpses into their personal lives and their learning journeys. I watched and marveled and now see that *all* of these elements came together in each act of writing.

Writing practices.

Because the organization of classroom created the contexts in which the focal participants were expected to write, I began by first examining practices as learners within the classroom. As learners, José, Flora, and Felipe shared similar stories of K–12 teachers who gave them individualized attention, who encouraged them, and who motivated them. They recalled difficult experiences of feeling singled out or left behind. When they encountered obstacles in the adult education classroom, they quickly pointed out their learning gaps and suggested that they could do better with "more practice." They enjoyed interacting with the other adult learners and the instructors. They welcomed opportunities to talk about their families and their lives beyond the classroom.

As writers, José, Flora, and Felipe relied on their K–12 experiences to define themselves as writers (or not) and to engage in conversations about writing. They told the instructors that they needed more practice with the rules of writing. They were given opportunities to think and write beyond the rules, but, as if by reflex, each came back to an intense focus on the correctness of the individual word. They each encountered obstacles as they wrote, and each reached a point where they were frustrated by what they

were asked to do as writers. There was comfort in working with the concrete (e.g., commas, quotation marks, verb tense). So much so, that I began to see a pattern of starting with large questions about audience, purpose, and organization but quickly narrowing to small questions about correctness and rules. I visualized this pattern as an inverted pyramid (▽) or, more appropriately, as a funnel. Big ideas were reduced to small ideas and were eventually lost as the instructors and adult learners narrowed their conversations to the rules of writing.

The focal participants' locations at the classroom table greatly influenced their individual experiences as learners and writers. A place at the ESL end of the table meant working and talking with Suzanne and the other adult learners, sharing personal experiences, practicing the rules of writing, writing responses to the evening's reading activity, and, on occasion, pushing back when activities seemed irrelevant or inappropriate. A place at the GED® end of the table meant working independently, practicing the rules of the five-paragraph essay, writing responses to GED® practice prompts, and reviewing the frustrating but necessary steps for taking the GED®. Each focal participant took a very different path to find his or her place at the table. José found a place with Suzanne and the ESL group; Flora, a place with Hillary and the GED® group; and Felipe, a place in the middle.

Writer identities.

As a novice researcher, it was a bit daunting to think about how to go about exploring identity, especially the identities of people I would only know for a short time. I realized quickly, however, that I could learn a great deal by simply listening to their

stories and by weaving conversations and stories together to understand each focal participant as a "past, present, and future self." Stories and conversations also gave me insights into histories and experiences. I began to understand the adult learners at a deeper level, and I began to see and appreciate the larger narratives at work. I depended greatly on this approach because there is a rich history of research around the value of narratives. Narratives provide deep insights into identity and into the people who tell them. Tellers share narratives to shape identity, to develop an understanding of self, and to become the narratives they tell about themselves (Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Schiffrin, 1996).

The language arts classroom was rich with stories, what Labov (1972) refers to as personal experience narratives. The adult learners shared stories as they worked in their groups. They told stories about previous schooling experiences; interactions with family, friends, and community; previous and current jobs; and topics connected to the evening's reading activity. I recorded and analyzed each of the narratives and used what I learned to understand the past, present, and future self of each focal participant.

This understanding of a writer's past, present, and future self was especially helpful for exploring writer identity. For my purposes, it was necessary to know something about each focal participant's experiences in the K–12 system, to capture a glimpse of their lives outside the classroom, and to imagine their paths when they leave the adult education program. I accomplished this by listening to and thinking deeply about their stories (a valuable takeaway for future researchers). This act of listening was especially important given the context of the language arts classroom. The instructors and

adult learners were intensely focused on meeting requirements put in place by Outreach, Inc., AmeriCorps®, Texas Workforce Commission, GED® Testing Service, etc. Experience tells us that an intense focus on the larger institutions can leave members of a classroom at a loss of how to know and talk to one another as members of a community. Individual lives and experiences are lost in larger discourses around evaluation, assessment, and accountability. Witherell (1991) notes that assessment can be useful, but it too often "takes the place of the attention and dialogue that the practitioner needs in order to understanding individuals in the context of their personal and cultural environments" (p. 84). She further explains the power of narrative in the classroom.

> The teller or receiver of stories can discover connections between self and other, penetrate barriers to understanding, and come to know more deeply the meanings of his or her own historical and cultural narrative. . . . They enable us, in Cynthia Ozick's words, to "leap into the other" (1986, p. 65), imagining the experience and feelings of the other (p. 84).

Given my short time there and the sometimes-tricky work of forming relationships with other adults, I used narrative to "leap into the other" and used that lens to consider the writer identities present before, during, and after acts of writing. For José, I captured a moment in which he worked with Suzanne to write sentences and focus on what he knew best—correctness and rules. In that one act, José wrote fifteen correct sentences filled with references to family and experiences. He wrote with authority, and Suzanne talked to him as a fellow writer. In this instance of writing, José experienced personal success, and he saw himself as someone who would one day write a book. For

Flora, I observed as she worked with Hillary to write a five-paragraph essay. Over the course of two evenings, she completed a mind map, a rough draft, and a final version. She worked independently but checked in with Hillary at steps along the way. During a proofreading session, Flora watched as the few references to her own knowledge and experiences were edited out of the writing. Later in that session, she and Hillary became lost and frustrated as they talked about text evidence and organization. Flora continued on, however, and she completed what she considered to be a "dumb" exercise of using the same words and repeating the same ideas. For Felipe, I was unable to observe anything more than him completing grammar worksheets. He entered the classroom as someone reluctant to write or to see the value in writing. After a few brief interactions with Hillary (one which involved extensive editing of his first essay), he moved to the center of the table (away from both groups) and began to work on his own.

These moments in writing speak deeply to the identity work occurring within one adult education classroom, but I think it is safe to pull back and look at a larger picture. Adult learners come to our classrooms with varying histories and experiences with writing, with varying ideas about what writing is and how it is done, and with varying beliefs in themselves as writers. As educators, these variances should compel us to avoid narrowing writing to a discreet set of skills or rules, limiting conversations to what we perceive to be the right answer or the right way, and stalling the complex identity work in motion. These variances, rather, should encourage us to see writing as a far greater act than putting words on paper. Writing is about building a community in which writers are

free to explore personal beliefs, interests, and values (Roozen, 2015). It is about ensuring that each writer finds his place within the community.

Implications of the Study

This study offers a brief but much needed exploration of writing practices and writer identities of adult learners participating in an adult education program. It adds to the limited research regarding the writing practices and writer identities of adult learners and, indirectly, contributes to research regarding writing instruction in adult education classrooms. More important, this study contributes to early research in writing instruction and writing practices in light of new requirements included in the 2014 update to the GED®.

Implications for adult education policy.

This study is the result of interactions with policymakers who, at the urging of business leaders, continue to explore ways to improve the literacy skills of Texas's rapidly growing population of adults who, for various reasons, did not complete high school or did not acquire the literacy skills needed to successfully complete job-related tasks. There is also great concern regarding the large number of high school graduates who enter universities and other postsecondary institutions and are almost immediately routed into developmental education programs for additional instruction and practice in writing.

These concerns are typically addressed through (1) new funding to organizations charged with finding solutions to a growing "literacy crisis" and (2) increased funding to the institutions and/or programs responsible for providing remedial education. Each

round of funding also contains a healthy amount set aside for testing services that, after the work is done, measure the academic skills of adult learners and, indirectly, evaluate the effectiveness of programs. It is a relatively predictable pattern that is not unique to Texas. It is also a pattern that, to date, has not achieved the results policymakers hope for.

As an employee of one of those systems (a state education agency), I can affirm that those who continue to fund this cycle of research, remediation, and testing typically do so with the best of intentions. Their limited experiences, however, prevent them from understanding the complex nature of the work at hand and send them in pursuit of one sure answer. They look to experts, and, in the current political climate, the experts reply with narrow, shortsighted recommendations on how literacy skills can be improved. In the case of writing, the experts who currently have the power to speak have a limited understanding of the complex work involved in improving and measuring writing.

Funding and support for educators.

Funding and support will inevitably flow through legislative bodies, but it should ultimately land with organizations that understand the challenges of working with adult learners, the complexities of literacy instruction, and the power of exemplary work already occurring within many classrooms. Yes, community-based organizations such as the one in this study must continue to receive funding and support. These organizations are an important part of a community network and are often the first to offer services and support to the disenfranchised members of rapidly growing, diverse communities. Greater funding, however, must go to organizations that have a rich history in working with educators who understand the realities of classrooms and who understand the complex

nature of literacy instruction, particularly writing instruction. One such organization is the National Writing Project (NWP), a national network of professional development sites serving prekindergarten through university teachers across all subject areas. The NWP gathers and shares the knowledge and expertise of successful teachers, engages in continuous research, and recognizes that there is no single approach to teaching a diverse population. Greater change comes from teachers working with teachers.

Better forms of assessment.

At this time, Texas policymakers are in the process of rethinking its sole reliance on the GED®. The 2014 move to the latest version created a major disruption across adult education centers, with numbers of test takers falling and numbers of successful test takers falling dramatically. Adult education providers and adult learners impacted by the changes in the exam provided testimony to the State Board of Education (SBOE) throughout 2015. They told stories of increased costs, difficulties in completing a computer-based assessment, and increased rigor, which appears to measure college readiness skills rather than high school equivalency. The SBOE, greatly concerned by their stories, determined that testing should be expanded to include other tests. At this time, Texas, like many other states, is in the process of expanding testing options from one vendor to three: GED®, HiSET® (owned by Educational Testing Services), and TASC® (owned by Data Recognition Corporation).

This expansion provides greater opportunities for adult learners, but there may be some unintended consequences along the way. I envision more affordable options and a choice in which test is best suited for the test taker. I also see adult education programs

aligning with specific tests and, possibly, adjusting instruction to better prepare for one test. One program, for example, may tout itself to be an excellent HiSET® preparation center. These alignments to a specific test create the greatest concern. I fear adult learners will begin to measure their value against which test they can afford and/or complete. I also fear the testing companies will begin to lobby business and industry to favor one test over another, and we will descend into a strange shell game of tests. One problem solved, and yet many more created.

The more logical approach is to rethink assessment in general. We have ample evidence that assessment in its current form has hurt educational gains more than it has helped. We must stop thinking of a one-time assessment as a valid measurement and move to a formative system that measures growth for the individual learner. We must move evaluation and assessment back into the classroom and back to teachers who watch learning occur over an extended period of time, who understand their community, who understand the multiple paths our students—children and adults—travel.

For writing assessment specifically, we must also be mindful of the tremendous damage done by the current assessment of writing (i.e., state assessments, SAT®, GED®) as one-time events that measure discreet skills and specific genres. As Anson (2015) explains,

> When writers' contexts are constrained and they are subjected to repeated practice of the same genres, using the same processes for the same rhetorical purposes and addressing the same audience, their conceptual framework for writing may become entrenched, "solidified," or "sedimented" (p. 77).

Just as with the adult learners of this study, students begin to see writing as a five-paragraph essay or a paragraph that must begin with a hook, and they begin to question the relevance and usefulness of these inauthentic forms of writing. We must show students the many ways writing defies one single form, one single set of rules. Writing is a highly valued skill that merits measurement, but it should be measured multiple times, in multiple forms, and for multiple audiences by those who truly understand writing—teachers.

Implications for educators who work with adults.

It is immensely evident that I place great value in educators. I continue to marvel at the warmth and openness of the Education Center and the willingness of two young instructors—Suzanne and Hillary—to let me sit in their classroom as they continuously wrestled with writing and writing instruction. They devoted an extraordinary amount of time and energy to teaching adult learners, but they also taught me several valuable lessons that I will continue to think about well beyond this study.

Share power.

As I examined the interactions between the instructors and adult learners, I came to understand that, for these adult learners, writing is an act of negotiating power. They came to the classroom each evening as adults, and for a few hours, they were asked to set aside those roles and act as students. They generally complied, but there were moments in which they reminded the instructors that they, too, were capable of exerting authority. Simply put, the adult learners moved between two worlds and two identities—adult and

student. These identities gave each adult learner the ability to speak with authority ("I know") or to defer to authority ("I need more practice").

For educators, it is important to remember that adult education classrooms are filled with tacit negotiations of power. The adult learners enter a classroom, and they become students again. Throughout this process, they move between adult and student roles. This movement between adult and student is especially important as we think about how to best support writing development in adults. We must create opportunities to give power back, to let writing activities become acts in which writers speak with authority about what is valuable and important to them. We must treat adult learners as writers who navigate the work world, who raise families, who interact in multiple contexts—social, school, community—and who come to a classroom to be part of a community of writers.

Build relationships.

As I've touched on numerous times throughout this study, it is greatly important to welcome conversations in the classroom. As Suzanne showed us, conversations can gravitate between social and instructional, and they can be filled with connections to reading, to self, and to the classroom. These conversations create moments in which stories are told, and we get a chance to know each adult learner as a past, present, and future self. This knowledge can greatly inform our work with each adult learner, and it can create relationships in which adult learners feel empowered to talk about the challenges and frustrations they may be experiencing. As you'll recall, the adult learners of this study were open to sharing stories about themselves as students and writers. They were willing to talk about previous schooling experiences (which can greatly inform our

work) and to talk about their gaps in learning (which can also greatly inform our work). Yes, I was able to glean information about the adult learners through interviews and quick, personal conversations, but I was able to learn far more about each and every participant by simply listening.

Initial meetings with adult learners are exceptionally important, especially in light of the high turnover rate adult education programs frequently experience. I propose that those first few moments are spent talking and establishing an understanding between educator and student. Let each adult learner know he is welcome and you want to understand his strengths, his challenges, and his preferences as a learner. I suggest beginning with questions like the ones listed below, and let the conversation go where it needs to go.

- What do you want me to know about you as a learner?
- What do you want me to know about you as a writer?

I propose these questions knowing there is some risk involved. My early experiences in adult education classrooms taught me that not everyone is open to conversations or relationships, and that is perfectly fair. You have put the questions out there, and you have established yourself as an educator who is genuinely interested in his or her students. Remember, non-answers are answers; “I am not a writer” speaks volumes.

Limitations

The topic of this study and my presence in the language arts classroom created a focus on writing I feel relatively certain would not have been present under normal

circumstances. I noted that early conversations unnaturally drifted towards writing—probably to capture my attention—or ended with statements about wanting to write more or to become a writer. (Rarely heard in a language arts classroom.) I also wondered if Suzanne and Hillary felt compelled to introduce more writing activities for my benefit. As I talked to each of them about the writing activities, I was told they were following an established routine that included daily writing. This was confirmed as I watched the adult learners turn in or search for writing samples from activities prior to the study. Nevertheless, I feel that my presence, my questions, and my requests for writing samples led the instructors and the adult learners to talk about writing at a deeper level than they typically experienced.

This study was also one small glimpse into an incredibly complex system. I worked with a small number of participants—two instructors and six adult learners—and my time at the Education Center was short—approximately three evenings a week for nine weeks. I recognize research within adult education programs is typically fast-paced, unpredictable, and challenging. I celebrate and appreciate the six adult learners who consistently attended, but I regret that I was not able to work with several others who entered the program but left after one or two visits.

Future Research

While this study was able to speak to writing practices and writer identities of adult learners, it did so within limited interpretations of writing. One group produced short paragraphs in response to prompts offered by Suzanne, the other five-paragraph essays in response to GED® practice exercises. The research field should continue to

explore writing practices and writers identities of adult learners, but it should do so with broader definitions of writing and in settings in which adult learners are not constrained by a single genre or purpose.

Future studies focusing on writing practices and writer identity throughout the creation of authentic texts will greatly inform the field. They will also lead to deeper appreciation and understanding of the adult learners who enter our classrooms.

Appendix A: Interview Protocols for the Focal Participants

Round One:

1. Why are you participating in this program?
2. What goals do you want to accomplish while you are in this program?
3. Please describe your experiences with school before coming to this program.
4. Please describe your experiences with writing before coming to this program.
    a. What do you remember about writing at home?
    b. What do you remember about writing at school?
        i. What did teachers tell you about your writing?
        ii. Do you recall any writing you completed?
        iii. Was there any writing you were especially proud of?
        iv. Do you remember having any difficulties in learning to write or in completing a writing assignment?
5. How would you describe yourself as a writer?
    a. What are the different kinds of writing you do in your life?
    b. What steps do you go through when writing in the classroom?
    c. What are your strengths as a writer?
    d. What are your weaknesses?
    e. What are your favorite parts about writing?
    f. What are your least favorite parts about writing?
    g. When given a choice, what do you write about?
6. When have you felt good about yourself as a writer?

a. Were you in or out of school?

b. What made the experience positive?

7. Do you think writing is important? Why or why not?
8. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about you as a student? about you as a writer?

Round Two:

Let's look at your writing for a while.

1. What do you remember about writing this essay, story, paragraph, etc.?
2. When you read your writing, what are your favorite parts? Why?
3. What your least favorite parts? Why?
4. Do you think you need to make any changes?
5. What do you think the instructor will say about this example of your writing?
6. If you talk to the instructor about your writing, what will you say?
7. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about this writing?

Appendix B: Interview Protocols for the Instructors

Round One:

1. What led you to become an adult literacy educator?
2. What do you find to be the most rewarding part of being an educator? the most challenging?
3. How would you describe the curriculum materials used in this program?
4. Do you bring in other materials?
5. Do you plan additional activities other than what is provided in the curriculum materials?
6. What is your experience in teaching writing? in teaching writing to adult literacy learners?
7. What do you find to be the most rewarding part of teaching writing? the most challenging?
8. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about you as an educator? About you as a writing teacher?

Round Two:

Let's look at writing samples from (Focal Participant) for a while.

1. If you were to describe (Focal Participant) as a writer, what would you say?
2. What were the objectives for this writing?
3. Do you think (Focal Participant) met those objectives? Why or why not?
4. Do you recall any specifics about (Focal Participant) creating this piece of writing that you would like to share?

5. As you continue to work with (Focal Participant) in future writing activities, what will you focus on?
6. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about (Focal Participant) and his writing? about (Focal Participant) and your work with him as a writer?

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